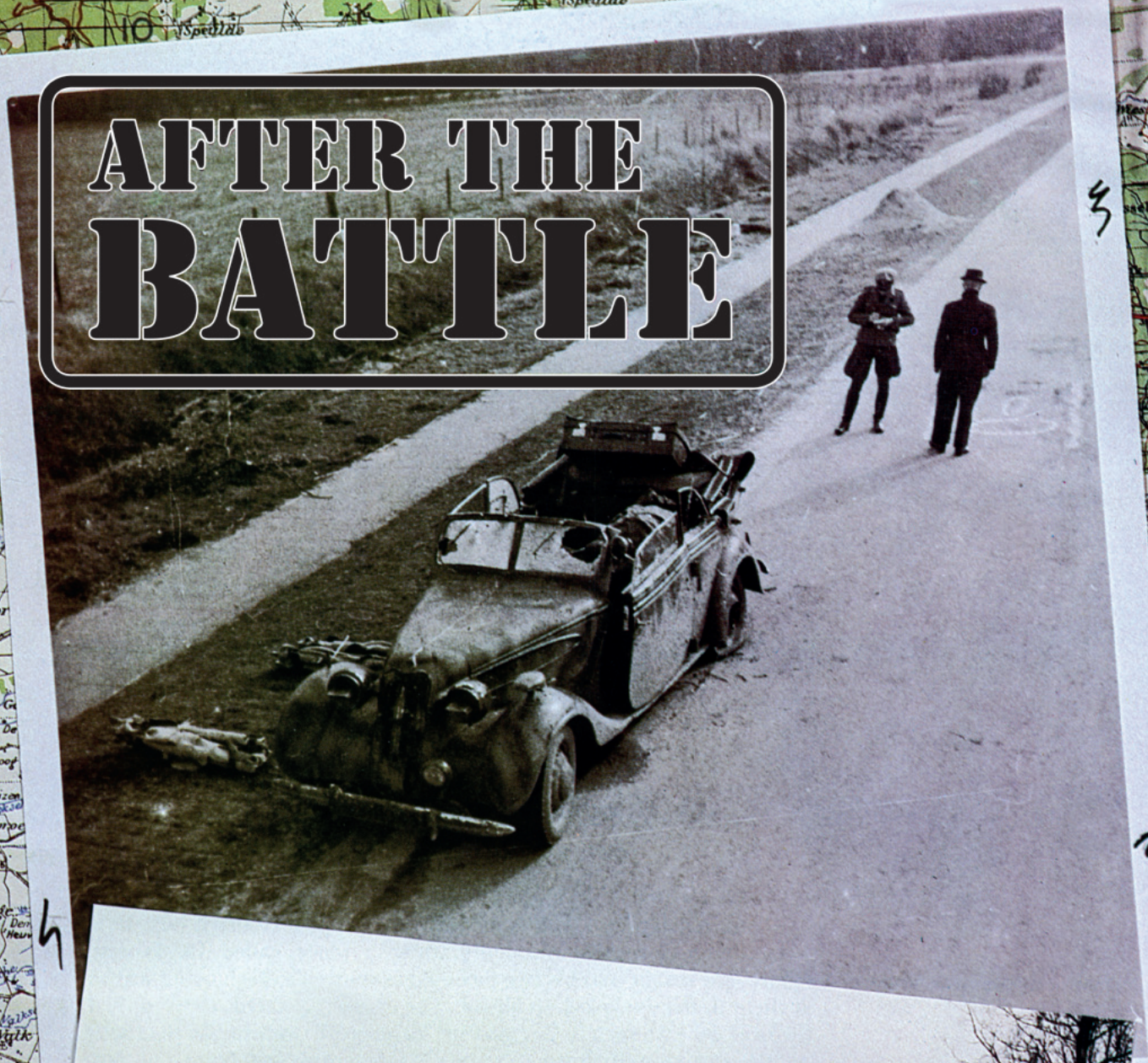
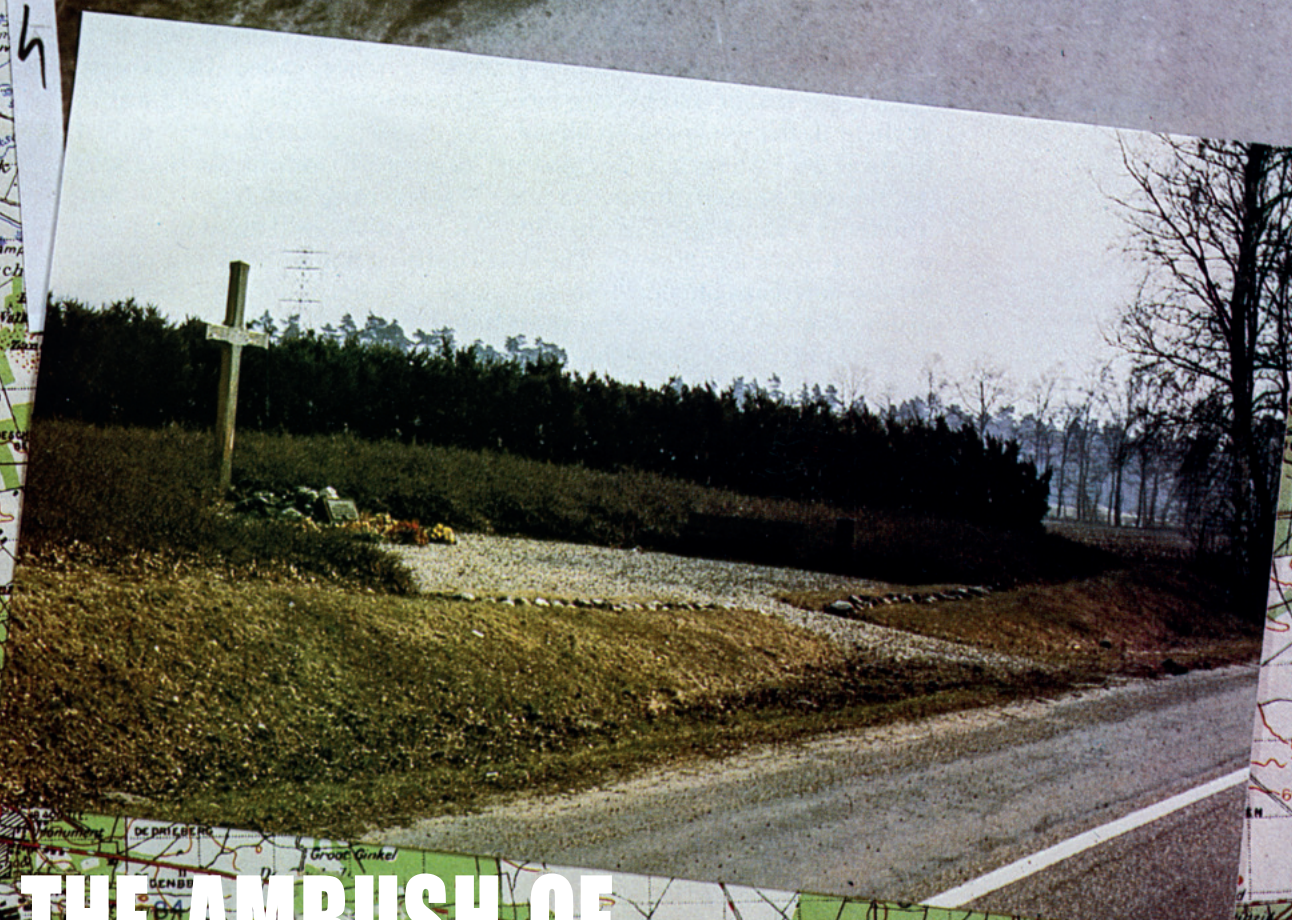
AFTER THE BATTLE





THE AMBUSH OF SS-GENERAL RAUTER

Number 56

AFTER THE BATTLE

NUMBER 56

Edited by Winston G. Ramsey
Published by Battle of Britain Prints International Ltd.,
Church House, Church Street,
London E15 3JA, England
Telephone: 081-534 8833
Fax: 081-555 7567
Printed in Great Britain by
Plaistow Press Ltd., London E15 3JA

© Copyright 1987

After the Battle is published quarterly on the 15th of February, May, August and November.
United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
Seymour Press Ltd., Windsor House, 1270 London Road, Norbury, London SW16 4DH. Telephone: 081-679 1899
United States Distribution and Subscriptions:
Bill Dean Books Ltd., P.O. Box 69, Whitestone, New York 11357. Telephone: 1–718–359–6969
Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1 Northrup Crescent, St. Catharines, Ontario, L2M 6P5.
Telephone: (416) 937 3100
Australian Distribution:
Technical Book and Magazine Company, Pty, Ltd., 289–299 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000.
Telephone: 663 3951
New Zealand Distribution:
South Pacific Books (Imports) Ltd., 6 King Street, Grey Lynn, Auckland 2.
Telephone: 762-142
Italian Distribution:
Tuttostoria, Casella Postale 395, I–43100 Parma.
Telephone: 521 94702, Telex 532274 EDIALB I
Dutch Language Edition:
Quo Vadis, Postbus 3121, 3760 DC Soest.

CONTENTS

THE AMBUSHING OF SS-GENERAL HANNS RAUTER
Rauter 1
The Ambush 6
The Reprisals 11
The Aftermath 14
IT HAPPENED HERE
The Italian Air Raid on Bahrain 18
THE EASTERN FRONT
The battlefields outside Warsaw 22
An awakened interest 23
A brief historical background 24
Exploring the German positions overrun September 10-15 25
Attempt against the second German line, September 15-20 32
The battle for Choszczowka 36
In conclusion 40
WRECK RECOVERY
An Epic Excavation
Pilot Officer Charles Barber 41
READERS' INVESTIGATIONS
Malta Marine Craft 52

Front Cover: The scene at De Woeste Hoeve on the Arnhem–Apeldoorn road on the afternoon of March 7, 1945 a few hours after SS-General Hanns Rauter had been ambushed in his BMW 326, seen here still with the bodies of his driver and orderly inside. Our comparison shows the memorial to 116 Dutchmen who were shot close to the ambush site as part of the German reprisals which followed.

Centre Pages: The macabre aftermath of an uncleared battlefield on the Eastern Front. Boguslaw Perzyk and friends with discoveries found around Warsaw.

Back Cover: The funeral of Pilot Officer Charles Barber at St Oswald's Churchyard, Finningley, Yorkshire, on October 15, 1986. Photo by Corporal WRAF Diane Edmonds.

All photographs credited RIOD are the copyright of the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie — the Dutch State Institute for War Documentation.

ISSN: 0306–154X

THE AMBUSHING OF SS-GENERAL HANNS RAUTER

BY KAREL MARGRY

On the night of March 6, 1945, a BMW convertible, its roof down, was making its way along a road in the occupied Netherlands. In it were three Germans. Suddenly, near a place called De Woeste Hoeve, the driver and his two passengers spotted a torch being waved at them in the darkness up ahead. The driver hesitated, then applied the brakes. Two men in German uniforms were standing on the road. As the car slowed down, an angry voice rang out from the car. Suddenly a short burst of automatic fire rent the cold night air. For a moment there was silence. Then, abruptly, a hail of Sten gun bullets hit the car from all sides. Seconds later, the occupants lay sprawled inside. One of them was the most hated and most feared man in the Netherlands: SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und der Polizei Hanns Rauter.

The scene at the ambush site the following afternoon, March 7, 1945, looking up the road towards Arnhem. The bodies of Rauter's orderly and driver still lie slumped within the BMW 326 convertible. (RIOD)

RAUTER

Between May 1940 and May 1945, the Netherlands were governed by a Reichskommissar, Dr Arthur Seyss-Inquart. Seyss-Inquart was an Austrian who had been appointed by Hitler personally. Under him, Seyss-Inquart had four General-Komissare (Commissioner Generals) of which Rauter was undoubtedly the most important. There was General-Kommissar Friedrich Wimmer for Administration and Justice; Hans Fischböck for Economic Affairs; and Fritz Schmidt for 'Special Purposes' (which meant looking after German Nazi Party interests in Holland). Rauter was General-Kommissar für das Sicherheitswesen — Commissioner General for Public Safety.

Rauter derived far greater power, though, from his second title, that of Höhere SS und Polizeiführer Nordwest (HSSPF, Higher SS and Police Leader — 'Nordwest' being the pan-Germanic denomination for the Netherlands). The Higher SS and Police Leaders were Himmer's personal representatives in their appointed regions and they were responsible only to him. Rauter's position was anomalous, since, in his capacity as HSSPF, he received his orders direct from Himmler, although he was supposed to clear them with Seyss-Inquart. In fact, when it came down to it, Rauter's allegiance to Himmler was undoubtedly stronger than his feelings of subordination to Seyss-Inquart. Himmler was his one and only hero, to whom he was totally devoted and whom he obeyed at all times.

As HSSPF, Rauter commanded all SS organisations in the Netherlands. These included the Ordnungspolizei (the ordinary German Police Force), the Sicherheitspolizei und Sicherheitsdienst (Sipo und SD, Secret Police and Security Service), and all Waffen-SS units stationed there. Later, when SS units made up of Dutch volunteers were formed, they too came under Rauter's command. He also commanded the entire Dutch police force.

The Höhere SS und Polizeiführer Nordwest, Hanns Rauter, in a typical pose in 1943.

Rauter with Dutch Lieutenant-General (retd) Hendrik Seyffardt, commander of the 'Vrijwilligerslegioen Nederland'. The Volunteer Legion, set up immediately after the invasion of Russia as part of the Third Reich's 'anti-Bolshevik crusade', was officially organised outside the SS. Rauter, however, had other plans and, from the start, the Legion trained and fought under the Waffen-SS. Soon, Seyffardt realised he was no more than a figurehead. This picture was taken in The Hague on July 26, 1941, just after the march-past of the second group of volunteers to leave for the Eastern Front had taken place. (RIOD)

As HSSPF, Rauter was to promote the far-reaching political ambitions of Himmler and to foster the SS ideology in the Netherlands. His political adversary here was General-Kommissar Schmidt, who supported the NSB, the Dutch Nazi party led by Anton Mussert, but with the secret aim of himself one day becoming Gauleiter of a Netherlands annexed by Germany. To thwart this, Rauter created a Dutch political SS as a counterforce to the NSB and a first step towards integrating the Netherlands into Germany, but under SS rule.

In the field of ideology, Rauter took care of the multitudinous racial, educational and propagandistic activities of the SS within his domain.

But for the Dutch, who knew almost nothing of his political machinations, the name Rauter meant only one thing: fear. If, to them, Seyss-Inquart was the symbol of Nazi occupation, Rauter was that of Nazi terror. It was the Reichskommissar who, for five long years, issued one decree after another, accompanied more often than not with some sort of threat or measures to be taken as punishment; but it was always the Höhere SS und Polizeiführer Nordwest who put such measures into effect, and the notorious pink posters announcing death sentences, summary executions, deportations, etc., invariably bore his name at the foot of them.

To look at, he was fearsome — a tall, tough-looking man with an aquiline nose and a Skorzeny-type scar on his face. In the occupied Netherlands he, more than anyone else, personified everything that was brutal and evil about Nazism.

Rauter had indeed a typical Nazi character. Although not without intelligence and cunning, he was no intellectual. Subtle thinking was beyond him. He liked to regard himself as a man of action and determination who could make difficult decisions quickly. He despised weakness. Although he was strangely subservient to Himmler, he loved to rule over others and he was indeed a natural leader of men. But above all, he was a fighter, a warrior, and he had been all his life.

Hanns Albin Rauter was born on November 4, 1895, in Klagenfurt, Austria. He studied at the Technical High School at Graz but when war broke out in 1914 he volunteered for service in the Austrian Imperial Army. As an officer in the Gebirgs-Schüzen-Regiment 1, he fought in Italy and on the Albanian Front and was wounded twice. On his return to Graz in 1918, Rauter found Austria in turmoil. There was revolutionary unrest and the old empire was in turn being invaded by annexationist armies from Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary. Rauter joined a Frei Korps of nationalistic students (of which he soon became the leader) and took part in fighting off the intruders.

In 1919 he co-founded the Styrian Home Guard, the Steierische Heimatschutz, one of many such extremist right-wing Frei Korps in Austria at the time. At its peak this paramilitary corps numbered some 20,000 men. All through the 1920s Rauter organised provocative marches and led his irregular legions in street-fighting with Socialist groups, disrupting industrial strikes and generally creating unrest. In 1931 the Steierische Heimatschutz even prepared an abortive coup d'état, during which Rauter laid siege to the town of Graz for a day.

The Steierische Heimatschutz was even more pan-Germanic and anti-semitic than other Frei Korps and already in 1927 it made close contacts with the Austrian branch of the German Nazi Party. In 1933, when both organisations were banned, Rauter moved to Germany, where he organised the complete absorption of his Heimatschutz into the Nazi Party and helped run the relief campaign for Nazi refugees from Austria.

Himmler was impressed by his talents and in 1935 appointed him SS-Oberführer (SS-Brigadier). In 1938 he became chief of staff in the Silezia SS district. He was still there when, on May 22, 1940, he was chosen to become the HSSPF in the newly-occupied Netherlands.

As HSSPF, his primary tasks, apart from those of a political and ideological nature, were: to maintain order and quell unrest among the population; to subdue any sign of resistance and destroy any underground organisations; to carry out the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands.

Rauter first showed his real face in February 1941. On the 22nd and 23rd of that month nearly 400 Jews were arrested in Amsterdam — the first large-scale round-ups in Holland. In reaction, the Amsterdam population rose in a massive revolt. Triggered by the Communists, but otherwise spontaneously, protest strikes broke out all over Amsterdam and rapidly spread to neighbouring towns. Rauter responded fiercely: he sent the German police and SS troops into Amsterdam and had them open fire at the mass demonstrations. Eleven people were killed. Hundreds of others were arrested. Under this violent intimidation, the strikes broke. Four strikers were sentenced to death, many others to imprisonment. The mayors of Amsterdam, Haarlem and Utrecht were held liable and replaced by quislings. Municipalities were punished, Amsterdam being given fine of 15 million guilders.

The February Strike of 1941 did not stop the deportation of the Jews from the Netherlands. It went on exactly as planned. In the

The busy corner of Spui and Grote Marktstraat today. The Haagsch Modehuis is still a fashion house, but has changed its name to Lampe.

end, 104,000 of the 140,000 Dutch Jews were sent to the concentration camps at Westerbork and Vught and from there transported to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Sobibor. Although Rauter left the implementation of the anti-Jewish measures to the bureaucrats of his Central Branch for Jewish Emigration, based at Amsterdam, he of course bore a major personal responsibility for what took place. Furthermore, he mercilessly tracked down Jews who had gone into hiding and severly punished anyone who had helped them.

In 1942, Rauter caused a new wave of shock and indignation. In two separate raids, some 1,000 prominent citzens were arrested and Rauter announced that they would serve as hostages in the event of any attempt at sabotage. In August 1942, after a railway sabotage attempt, at Rotterdam, the first five hostages were executed. This killing of innocent people caused an uproar. People had yet to learn that under Rauter reprisal shootings were to be a standard form of retaliation and would become a sad but almost daily routine.

A group on which fell the full brunt of Rauter's determination to erase opposition were the university students. Already in 1940 the universities at Leiden and Delft had been closed temporarily because of student demonstrations against the dismissal of Jewish professors. The universities remained centres of unrest. Many students started illegal newspapers or joined other underground organisations. In February 1943 Rauter decided to clean up: round-ups were held in four university towns and nearly 600 students arrested. Higher education came to a standstill. The majority of the students refused an offer to sign a 'declaration of loyalty' and went into hiding. Those who were caught were sent off to work camps in Germany.

On April 29, 1943, the Germans decreed, without prior warning, that the entire former Dutch Army, 300,000-strong, would be re-interned as prisoners of war. The reaction to this was another general strike, but this time nationwide and especially strong in rural areas. Again, as in 1941, Rauter used violence and intimidation to restore order. Under summary justice, dozens of strikers were executed, often on the premises of their factories and mills. For maximum effect, the death sentences were immediately published. Under such repression, the strikes petered out.

The April-May Strikes, as they came to be known, made Rauter's name notorious in even the smallest village. To the Germans, the strikes had finally shown that their efforts to win over the Dutch people had definitely failed. From now on their only aim would be pure economic exploitation, coupled with total suppression of resistance. There was no more need for Rauter to conceal his ruthlessness. In recognition of his handling of the strikes, Hitler promoted him to SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei.

Shortly after, Rauter again issued a decree which affected every household. It had become obvious that the Dutch listened more to the BBC and Radio Orange than to the Nazified Dutch radio. Rauter had a simple solution: he confiscated every wireless set in the country. Over 800,000 sets were handed in. After that, having a radio was illegal and dangerous. Rauter had really declared war on the Dutch population.

Rauter (second from left) towering above the other main actors in occupied Holland: to his left Anton Mussert, leader of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB, the Dutch Nazi party), and, on the right, Reichskommissar Dr Arthur Seyss-Inquart. The picture was taken on October 11, 1941, during the oath-taking ceremony of the fourth group of legionnaires to leave Holland. This group consisted largely of NSB men and, like his rival Seyffardt (who can here be seen already relegated to a second row position in the cortège), Mussert hoped to keep his men outside the SS. His hopes were in vain: in May 1943 the integration of the Legion into the Waffen-SS was made official. (RIOD)

The Binnenhof, in The Hague, houses the Dutch Parliament. The building on the right is the Ridderzaal where, each year on the third Tuesday of September, the Queen delivers her speech from the throne.

Under the Arbeitseinsatz system, able-bodied men from occupied countries were called up for work in German factories. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, thousands of men went into hiding to escape this forced labour. It was Rauter's task to find them and he used every means at his disposal to do so. Back in 1940, he had had every person over fifteen years of age issued with an Identity Card. This card was almost impossible to forge and had made the assumption of a false identity, and travelling under it, extremely difficult. Now identity checks by German police were intensified. Surprise inspections were made at cinema and theatre exits, and sometimes soccer stadiums and churches were surrounded and every male trapped inside checked. From July 1943 onwards, Rauter organised 'man-hunts' on an even larger scale: whole villages or sections of cities were cordoned off and searched house by house. In this way, thousands of Dutchmen were caught and deported to Germany.

Nevertheless, by late 1943, the number of people in hiding — Jews, students, ex-servicemen, escapees of forced labour, members of the Underground — had reached a staggering 250,000. Rauter even tried to use the rationing system to root out these elusive masses, whereby with the introduction of a new ration book, to be issued only to those reporting in person and presenting an identity card, he hoped to effect a complete reregistration of the adult population and to deprive all those in hiding of food and other necessities. It was only the combined efforts of the Underground and patriotic civil servants which, by large-scale forging of documents and administrative sabotage, wrecked this scheme.

Throughout the occupation, Rauter fought a ruthless battle against the ever-growing Dutch Underground. Although he could not conceal a certain admiration for the men and women of the Resistance, in whom he recognised, to his way of thinking, 'the best racial elements' of the people, he was merciless in combating them. Anyone suspected of

Rauter taking the salute on the Binnenhof square. (RIOD)

Empty today, with only the occasional sight-seeing tourist.

working for an illegal newspaper, of aiding Allied airmen, of armed resistance, sabotage or espionage, was arrested by the feared Sicherheitsdienst. Rauter used agents-provocateurs to infiltrate Underground organisations . . . his men monitored the air waves to track down secret transmitters. He was extremely successful, too, particularly in 1942 and 1943 when whole groups were uncovered and arrested. Mass trials took place. Hundreds of Resistance workers were executed, thousands despatched to concentration camps from which they never returned.

As the war progressed, the struggle became more grim. When, starting in February 1943, some Underground groups took to assassinating prominent Dutch Nazis, Rauter organised a new kind of counter-terror which involved stealthily murdering totally innocent people. This was Operation 'Silbertanne' (Silver Fir). For every Nazi assassinated, three people were to be killed. Special Kommandos of (Dutch) SS men, dressed in civilian clothes, carried out these killings, usually under cover of darkness.

In 1944, and particularly after the Normandy invasion, Rauter's rule reached its cruel climax. Every act of armed resistance was followed by reprisals. Captured Resistance workers, sentenced to death without trial and overcrowding the Dutch jails, were named 'Todeskandidaten' (Death Candidates) and could be executed in any number when acts of violence occurred. These executions took place in public and the bodies were left lying at the roadside as a grim warning for everyone to see. By late summer of 1944, Rauter had truly become the hangman of the Netherlands.

As the Allied armies were racing towards the Dutch borders, Rauter, the old Frei Korps warrior, became restless. He had always thought himself more a soldier than a policeman or a politician. Now, with the Netherlands once more becoming a theatre of war, he saw a chance to return to his beloved soldiering.

In June 1944, he had already been appointed General der Waffen-SS, a military rank added to his other functions. On September 15, he reported for the first time to Generalfeldmarschall Walther Model, commander of Heeresgruppe B, at his HQ in Oosterbeek. Although the two Waffen-SS panzer divisions now in the Netherlands operated in the usual way under Wehrmacht command, Rauter still controlled some Waffen-SS units. These were the SS-Wachbataillon 'Nordwest', set up in 1942 to guard the concentration camps in the Netherlands, and three depot battalions of Dutch SS volunteers, called 'Landstorm Nederland'.

On September 17, as soon as he heard of the airborne landings at Arnhem, Rauter left The Hague and drove to a new HQ at Apeldoorn. One of his battalions was engaged to the south, but the rest he ordered to Arnhem at once. Coming in from the west, as part of a provisional Army unit, Kampfgruppe von Tettau, these untrained battalions took heavy losses against the British airborne troops. The remnants eventually formed part of the German ring around the perimeter at Oosterbeek. All through the battle, Rauter stayed near the front, trying to have a say in things although not exercising any actual command.

Following the German victory at Arnhem — of which he was exceedingly proud — Rauter asked to be given a proper military command and as a result of this Kampfgruppe Rauter was formed. It consisted of the SS-Wachbataillon and Grenadier-Regiment 1 'Landstorm Nederland' (soon to be combined into SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Brigade 'Nederland') and SS-Polizei-Regiment 3, composed of three battalions of uniformed police. From October 1944 to February 1945 this heterogeneous force guarded the Veluwe region and the IJssel river bridges against possible airborne assaults.

Rauter now devoted all his energy to military problems. Although officially still HSSPF, he had lost interest in police matters and left them to his subordinate, SS-Brigadeführer Dr Eberhardt Schöngarth, Befehlshaber der Sipo und des SD. This change, however, was not known to the public at large, which continued to regard Rauter as the supreme Nazi brute, the monster they had learned to fear and hate.

On February 6, 1945, Kampfgruppe Rauter was raised to the status of a provisional corps under 25. Armee (General Günther Blumentritt) and assigned a sector of the front along the Rhine and Waal rivers from Emmerich, just inside Germany, to Tiel in Holland. In addition to the Dutch SS brigade

Left: **Rauter and Mrs Gertrud Seyss-Inquart-Máchka (centre), the Reichskommissar's wife, during a visit to the SS-Schule 'Avegoor' at Ellecom (see map on page 7). The school was set up in May 1941 under SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr A. Brendel as an ideological training institute for the Dutch SS. Not surprisingly, physical fitness and weapons training were a regular part of the curriculum, in addition to political lectures. NSB men who wanted a firearms licence had to undergo pistol courses at 'Avegoor' and could thus be made susceptive to the SS doctrine. (RIOD)** *Right:* **Today, 'Avegoor' is a training centre for the Dutch union of civil servants Abva/Kabo, remaining remarkably unchanged since the days of more sinister teaching.**

Right: **The house on Kerkstraat in Didam which was Rauter's Corps Command Post in February-March 1945 and from where he left on his fatal journey to De Woeste Hoeve. The house belonged to the Von der Haar family who, at the time, were evacuated elsewhere. A son of the family still runs the textile and fashion shop next door.**

(renamed 34. SS-Grenadier-Division 'Landstorm Nederland' on February 10) and the SS-Polizei-Regiment, Rauter was allotted Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 23 (from 2. Fallschirmjäger-Division), a panzer detachment, a sturmgeschütz detachment, three artillery regiments and a flak regiment. Corps HQ was at Didam, a village ten miles east of Arnhem.

Daily, Rauter went out in his Schwimmwagen, inspecting defences and visiting command posts. These trips were not without risk: Allied air superiority was at its peak and within weeks Rauter lost two of his drivers to strafing. But, as much as he liked soldiering, he could not altogether abandon his duties as the highest SS official in the Netherlands. Seyss-Inquart, who had moved his Reichskommissariat closer to the Fatherland and was now at Apeldoorn, expected him once a week for consultation and discussion and so, every Wednesday morning, Rauter drove to Apeldoorn to attend a conference.

Left: **The destination Rauter did not reach: Seyss-Inquart's headquarters in Apeldoorn. In September 1944, the house was requisitioned by Dr Friedrich Wimmer, Seyss-Inquart's Commissioner General for Administration and Justice, but in March 1945 the Reichskommissar himself had his personal office there as well. In the front garden, the Germans built a large underground headquarters bunker but Seyss-Inquart only used it during air raid alarms. The picture was taken shortly after the liberation of Apeldoorn in April 1945, when the bunker was opened to the public. '6¼' was the Dutch nickname for Seyss-Inquart. (Gemeentearchief Apeldoorn)** *Right:* **Before the war, 54 Loolaan was owned by Jonkheer C.C. Beelaerts van Emmichoven. At present it houses an office of the Department for Buildings, Works and Domains. The bunker, now disused and sealed with an iron gate, can only be visited with special permission.**

But on Tuesday, March 6, he departed from his usual timetable. Tomorrow he would have two conferences at Apeldoorn, not just the one with Seyss-Inquart but one at 25. Armee headquarters as well, and so he decided he would leave for Apeldoorn that same evening. He could then spend the night at his usual hotel there and make an early start in the morning. Rauter notified his newly-assigned driver to have a car ready by 10.00 p.m. Little did he know what dramatic consequences this seemingly unimportant change of schedule would have.

Right: **The walls and roof of the bunker were 5 feet thick. Inside were three large rooms, a telephone exchange, an office complete with sleeping room and a toilet. There were two stairway exits, one leading to the house and one to the street outside. Both had air filtration plants to protect the occupants against gas attacks. Today one can still see the ventilator shafts on the grass-covered roof.**

THE AMBUSH

In September 1944, the three largest armed Resistance organisations in the Netherlands — the Knokploegen (KP, Armed Squads), Orde-Dienst (OD, Order Service) and Raad van Verzet (RVV, Council of Resistance) — were united into the Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten (BS, Dutch Interior Forces) under overall command of Prince Bernhard. The BS was divided into districts and when, in November 1944, the front lines stabilised along the Dutch rivers, fourteen of the nineteen BS districts were still in occupied territory. One of these was District 6, comprising the Veluwe. This undulating forest region with extensive heathlands and large wooded tracts was one of the few areas in the Netherlands suited for maquis warfare. The town of Apeldoorn was the centre of activity within District 6.

The Apeldoorn BS had taken over from the former KP organisation a small team, called GG-Groep, which was only used for the more risky operations. It was well armed with Sten guns, pistols and grenades and, having somehow got hold of SS uniforms, usually operated disguised as Germans. The team-leader was a dashing young mechanic, Geert Gosens.

In early March, 1945, the Apeldoorn BS was plagued by a serious transport problem. In the preceding weeks, mainly because of intensified searching by the Germans, it had lost the use of all its available cars and lorries. Two of these, incidentally, had been hidden in the garage of 6 Molendwarsstraat, the house where young Geert Gosens lived. Gosens, who had been asleep on the first floor when the SD raided his house, managed to get away over the roof, dressed only in underpants. Next day, with characteristic recklessness, he returned armed with a Sten gun and, from across the street, opened fire on the Germans removing the vehicles from the garage. He flattened the tyres and made good his escape, but the vehicles could not be recaptured.

The transport problem became acutely relevant on Tuesday, March 6. Information was received that a Wehrmacht truck was expected to collect 3,000kg of pork for Army distribution from a butcher's in the nearby village of Epe the following morning. In a country that had been systematically starved by the Germans since the previous autumn, such information was of vital importance. If the meat could be seized, it could replenish the BS's own meagre food supplies and the rest could be distributed clandestinely among the hungry population. The local Apeldoorn BS Sabotage Commander ordered Gosens and his team to try and do so.

No. 6 Molendwarsstraat in Apeldoorn, the house where BS Resistance team-leader Geert Gosens lived. On the right is the garage where the Apeldoorn Underground kept two of its vehicles and through the open doors of which Gosens opened fire on the Germans inside after they had raided his house one night. It was the loss of all their vehicles that prompted Gosens to plan the ambush to which Rauter fell victim by accident on the night of March 6, 1945.

Gosens saw an easy way of doing it: if the team, dressed in their German uniforms, were to arrive at the butcher's with a truck a short time before the real Germans were due, they could simply load up the meat and drive away with it. But that left another problem: where were they going to find a truck at such short notice? Using a private vehicle — even if they could arrange to obtain one or steal one — was always unfavourable because of the trouble it could get the owner into. But this time it was also impracticable for, in order not to arouse suspicion, the vehicle had to look like an army vehicle as well. What Gosens decided to do was to capture a German truck first, and do it that same night.

The decision made, Gosens notified his men to meet him at 17 Korteweg, a bakery shop of a trusted friend, Jaap Jonker, and one of their secret addresses. Six men were present that evening: four Dutchmen — Gosens himself, Henk de Weert, Karel Pruis and Wim Kok — and two Austrians: Sepp Köttinger and Herman Kempfer. The presence of Köttinger and Kempfer was remarkable: they had previously been in the Waffen-SS, but had deserted their unit and joined the Dutch Resistance. Both were trained fighters and of great value to the team. Whenever it operated in German uniforms, Köttinger, the more commanding of the two, took the lead and did all the talking in German. (Such is the irony of history that when Rauter, an Austrian, was attacked in the Netherlands, two of his attackers should be fellow-countrymen!)

Together, the six men sat down to formulate a plan. The discussion centred on the best place to lay an ambush. Some favoured the Apeldoorn–Amersfoort road, but Wim Kok proposed the road to Arnhem instead. It was quiet, the woods through which it ran offered ample cover and few people lived near it. Furthermore, it was close to one of the team's hiding places, a camp-site by the name of 'Coldenhove' in the woods near Eerbeek. Although Kok was a new member of the team — in everyday life he belonged to the Marechaussee (Dutch Mounted Police) — and this was to be his first action with it, the others accepted his proposal. Already once before, they had ambushed a German car there, taking the occupants prisoner and setting the vehicle on fire. This action had not caused any German reprisals at all and had apparently gone completely unnoticed.

Shortly after 10.00 p.m. the team set out on bicycles for the Arnhem road. All were dressed as Germans, except for Kok who wore his own Marechaussee uniform. Köttinger was in the uniform of an Oberscharführer (SS-Sergeant), Gosens and De Weert were

As its secret quarters in Apeldoorn itself, Gosens' group used this house on Zwolscheweg, owned by the Verdonk family. The street was renamed Koninginneweg after the war and the building at present accommodates a Legal Advice Bureau.

in those of Rottenführer (SS-Corporals), Pruis and Kempfer ordinary SS-Privates. All were armed with Stens. Gosens also carried a Walther pistol.

They had just started out when, at the railway crossing on Christiaan Geurtsweg, they were challenged by a German air-raid warden.

'Halt, wo fahren Sie hin?'

'That's none of your business', Köttinger snapped back with all the arrogance of an SS-NCO.

But the sentry was not easily put off:

'What's the password?' he wanted to know.

'*My* password is "Frankenstein".'

'But that's not ours . . . '

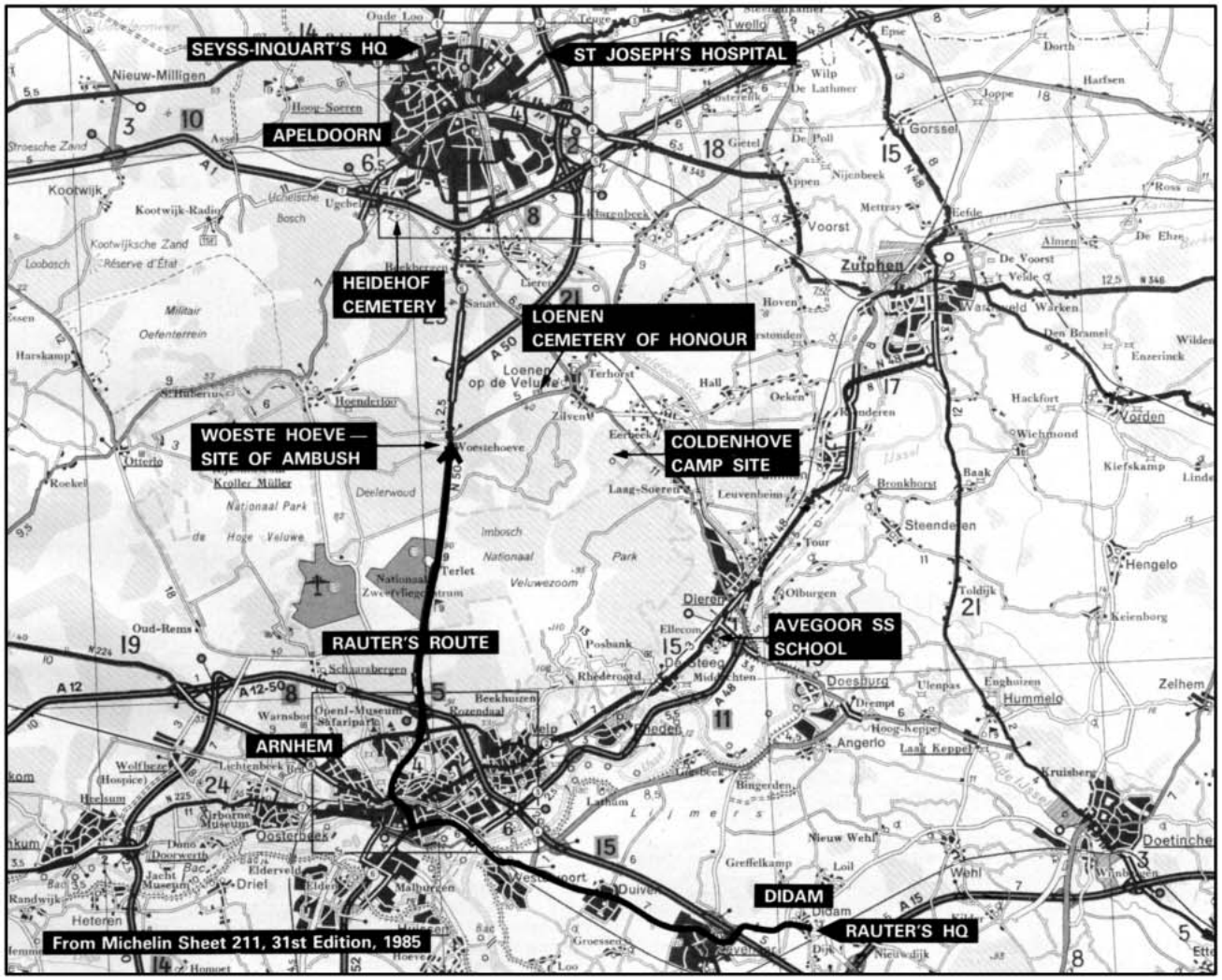
'I only know my own unit's password and yours does not concern me at all', said Köttinger, and at that they left the bewildered German and continued on their way.

Three miles further on, at the village of Beekbergen, they tried out their credibility as a patrol on traffic-control duty: flashing a torchlight they stopped an oncoming vehicle, which turned out to be a civilian lorry, and demanded to see the driver's papers. The Dutchman at the wheel obviously suspected nothing and obeyed promptly. Their self-confidence thus fortified, the team pedalled on until they reached a roadside cottage called 'De Woeste Hoeve'. Two hundred yards further on they stopped, laid down their bicycles on the grass verge, prepared their weapons and waited.

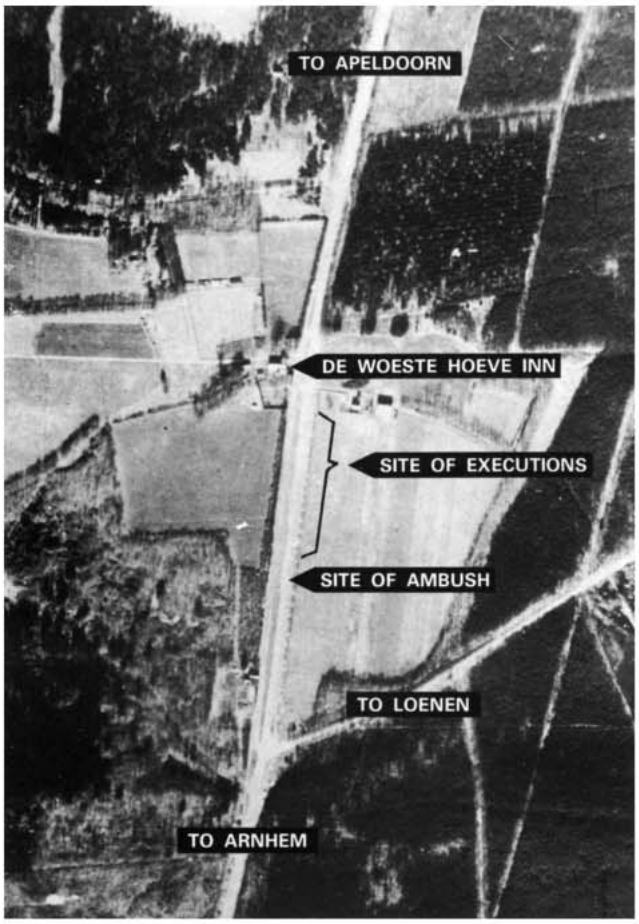
Soon they heard a vehicle approaching, but by the sound of the engine they took it to be a car and not the lorry they wanted, so they let it pass unchallenged. The noise died away in the distance, until they were left once more in total silence. This happened several times with cars from both directions. There was not a lot of traffic at that time of night and slowly the minutes ticked by. It was now close to midnight and, despite the nervous tension, the men could feel the cold entering through their clothes.

The bakery shop of Jaap Jonker at 17 Korteweg, from where the BS team set out for the ambush at De Woeste Hoeve. The man who took over the bakery from Jonker shortly after the war still remembers finding explosives hidden in the attic. Today, the bakery has disappeared and the shop entrance door has been changed into a side window of a private house.

Then, suddenly. all six pricked up their ears. Away in the darkness, coming from the direction of Arnhem, the sound of a heavier engine could be heard. Surely this must be a lorry. Quickly they climbed out of the ditch, stood up and took up their pre-arranged positions. Köttinger switched on his torch.



In the afternoon of March 7, a Sicherheitsdienst team conducted an investigation of the ambush site. From Apeldoorn they brought along Dutch police photographer Jan Muda to take a series of investigation pictures. Here the Germans reconstruct the probable positions of the ambushers which they determined from the empty cartridges found. Note that the BMW has been moved, the white chalk marking the position in which it was originally found. (RIOD)



An RAF reconnaissance photo taken on March 15, 1945 of De Woeste Hoeve. (Stiboka/Crown Copyright)

The same spot 42 years later. The road has been widened slightly to include the cycle-track on the right. In the distance, on the left, is the De Woeste Hoeve inn.

The De Woeste Hoeve inn lies beside the busy Apeldoorn-Arnhem road. In 1945 it was run by the Aartsen family. At the time of the ambush, four Germans, assigned fire watch duty on a nearby tower, were billeted at the inn. The Aartsens were among those questioned by the Sicherheitsdienst the day after the ambush.

An hour and a half or so earlier, as the BS team were cycling along the road out of Apeldoorn, Rauter came out of the house on Kerkstraat in Didam that was his Corps Command Post. The grey-green BMW convertible, an ordinary officers' car, stood waiting, its roof folded down. Rauter had a suitcase full of laundry that he wanted to have done at Apeldoorn, which he tied to the rack at the rear of the car. Then, as he always did, he sat in the front seat next to the driver. His orderly, Oberleutnant Exner, sat in the back.

Leaving Didam, they took the road to Zevenaar and from there the main road to Arnhem. Arnhem, after the wholesale evacuation of the population ordered by the Germans in September and its systematic looting, had become a ghost town. The Rhine bridge, blown by the Germans, lay mangled and broken in the river. Entering Arnhem from the east, Rauter's car passed the buildings down by the northern ramp, ruined and scarred by the September fighting, and turned into Eusebiusbuitensingel. Soon, the BMW was proceeding uphill out of the town, on the road to Apeldoorn. The car had black-out lights and only a few yards of the road ahead were visible.

Suddenly, a white light flashed in the distance up ahead. Peering through the darkness, Rauter saw two uniformed men standing on the road, one of them signalling them to halt. (Apparently, he did not see the others, who were standing back in the darkness.) He immediately sensed that something was wrong, his wariness perhaps increased by a curious coincidence, for only a fortnight before, he himself — after consultation with Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, commander of Heeresgruppe H, and General der Flieger Friedrich Christiansen, Wehrmacht Commander in the Netherlands — had decreed that nowhere in Holland, at any time of the day or night, were patrols to halt traffic in open country. This order had been prompted by the recent increase of attacks on German vehicles by Resistance groups and with the express purpose of making such attacks more difficult. Patrols, including those of the Dutch police, were allowed to establish check-points only in built-up areas, on the outskirts of towns and villages, and forbidden to do so in open country. So when Rauter saw two uniformed men, one with a torch, he was sure that this could not be an official roadblock. And although it flashed through his mind that the men could be waving him down because of a breakdown or road accident, he decided not to take any risks.

'Achtung! . . . be ready . . . probably terrorists in front of us!' he shouted, reaching for his sub-machine gun.

The body of Oberleutnant Exner is still facing rearwards, the position he was in when he was killed, and holding his sub-machine gun. It can be seen pointing upwards on his right. Another gun, probably Rauter's, is visible on the left of the rear seat. This photo also clearly shows the windscreen holed by Gosens' first volley. The car was a BMW 326 with a six-cylinder, 50hp engine, giving a maximum speed of 115kph. A total of 4,060 were built between 1936 and 1941. Note the black-out shields on the front lights. The large suitcase, strapped to the luggage rack, contained some laundry belonging to Rauter. (RIOD)

Jan Muda took most of his pictures from the roof of the lorry with which he and the others had come to De Woeste Hoeve. Note that the dashboard locker from which Rauter, although seriously wounded, managed to grab a Colt revolver, is still hanging open. (RIOD)

'Don't stop!' he ordered his driver, 'Full speed and drive into them!'

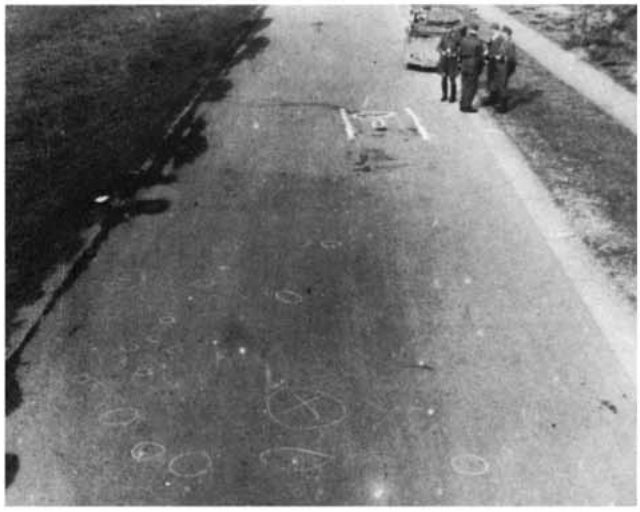
'You defend the rear!' he called out to Exner, who also had a sub-machine gun.

Rauter later blamed what happened on the inexperience of his new driver. Instead of accelerating straight through them, the driver hesitated, then applied the brakes. As the car slowed down, the man on the left, the one with the torch, could be seen pointing the light at the car's number plate and moving to ask for papers. Still not level with the two men, Rauter stuck his gun towards the one nearest to him, the one on the right, and shouted angrily, 'What's the matter, man, don't you know who we are?'

Köttinger and Gosens must have been as surprised as Rauter, the driver and the orderly. They had expected to see a lorry appearing, but what they saw was a car; they had anticipated an easy job overpowering the occupants, not Germans challenging them and grabbing for their weapons.

They had no time to think. The car had yet to stop. Gosens made a split-second decision and pulled the trigger. His first burst, a short one, went through the windscreen and hit the German in the co-driver's seat. 'Don't shoot and get out of the car!' he ordered, as the BMW finally came to a halt. But it was obvious that these Germans had no intention of obeying and were going to fight it out. Everything happened very fast. While Köttinger, still forward of the car, ran to his right and took up a position on the driver's side, Gosens raced along the other side of the car to the rear and shouted 'Fire!'

So far, the other team members, standing on the other side of the road a few yards back, had taken no part in the action. In the darkness, they could only vaguely see what was happening and when they heard Gosen's shout, they feared that he and Köttinger might be in their line of fire. Nonetheless, two of them — De Weert and Pruis — obeyed and let loose their Sten guns at the



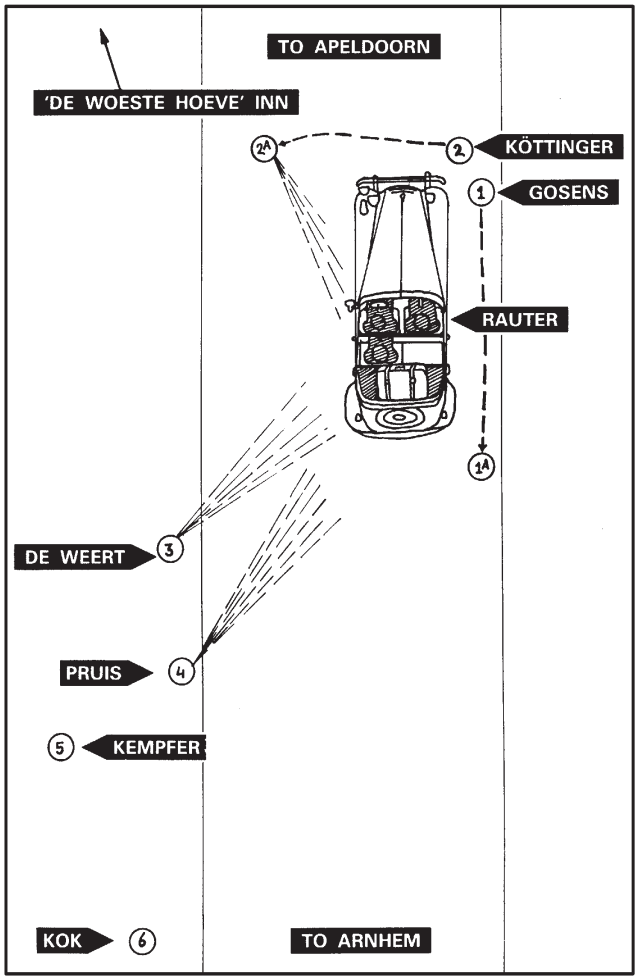
Left: **The road is dotted with circles indicating where spent cartridges were found. There are four Germans visible in Muda's pictures, but exactly who is who is not certain. The SD research was started by SS-Hauptsturmführer Thomsen and SS-Untersturmführer Bühe from the Arnhem SD. Before they left, SS-Hauptsturmführer Oscar Gerbig, SD chief at Apeldoorn, arrived with three men from the SD main office at Zwolle: SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Harders, SS-Untersturmführer Walter Bartels and Dutch police inspector Marten Slagter, a notorious collaborator, who may have been in German uniform as well. (RIOD)** *Right:* **Today the N-50 from Arnhem to Apeldoorn is one of the busiest main roads in Holland (besides motorways), making it a hazardous job to take comparison pictures — especially standing in the middle of the road!**

car. Köttinger opened up too and a murderous cross-fire swept the BMW and its occupants. Within a few seconds it was all over. No movement came from the car and the firing stopped. From the number of used Sten magazines, the men later calculated that they must have fired at least 234 rounds. Incredibly though, neither Gosens nor Köttinger had been hit.

In the hail of fire, Oberleutnant Exner, facing rearwards with his gun, was riddled with bullets and killed instantly. One bullet hit Rauter's driver behind the right ear and he slumped dead, his hand still clasping the hand-brake, his body against Rauter, who had slumped forward, bleeding profusely.

But Rauter, who had been hit first when Gosens fired his opening burst through the windscreen, was not dead. Those first bullets had gone through the fingers of his right hand, through his lower jaw (smashing his jaw bone) and through one of his lungs. Being furthest away from the attackers after the car came to a stop, he may have been a little more shielded than the other two when the shooting broke out after that. Still, a bullet from the rear went through his neck vertebrae and flung his body forward into the windscreen. Then, as he raised his left arm to push his dead driver aside and pull himself up by the windscreen frame, a bullet went through his left armpit and, finally, another grazed his left arm. Rauter later claimed that

Left: **An equipment box lies empty next to a slab of drying plaster. The SD made moulds of all the tyre tracks found near the BMW. Rauter's statement, that he had heard a lorry stopping and leaving after the ambush, was, however, a false lead: his attackers had come on bicycles and the vehicle he heard had been a passing Wehrmacht truck. (RIOD)** *Right:* **An unspectacular piece of tarmac, photographed in February 1987. Our author, Karel Margry, experienced incredible difficulties in reconstructing the exact course of events at De Woeste Hoeve — the 'official' resistance account written in 1946 uses only pseudonyms for the six gunmen and, he says 'it took me a long time even establishing their real names. Three are alive today, but they remain very unwilling to talk about the past. I was, however, able to piece together the story from other sources, among them Rauter's own accounts written in captivity after the war, and I had almost completed it when one of the survivors, in a rare, candid mood, decided to talk and not only confirmed most of my surmises, but added new details. I also talked to the retired Dutch police inspector who took the investigation pictures for the SD, was present after the reprisal killings at De Woeste Hoeve, and identified the victims when they were exhumed from their mass grave six weeks later. So I think I can say this is the first time the complete, true story of the ambush has been told.'**



'Coldenhove' camping-ground, in the woods near Eerbeek, was the team's secret hide-out. Today 'Coldenhove' has been modernised into a holiday bungalow park.

The crossroads at the entrance of Loenen village where the BS team, cycling away from the ambush, was challenged by a German sentry.

after all this, he still managed to reach for a large .45in Colt which was in the dashboard locker and to unlock the safety catch with his unharmed left hand. Whatever truth there is in this, as he lay there he did not, or could not, use the gun.

After the firing stopped, the six men, shaken and disconcerted, cautiously approached the car and, by the light of the torch, glanced inside. The only sound coming from any of the bodies was a deep rattling. They were convinced that the occupants must all have been dead or dying. 'We've got them, the bastards', one of the team let out. It was spoken as a natural release of pent-up tension, but to Rauter, lying semi-conscious in the car, it served to confirm that the ambush had been especially set up to assassinate him. To him it was unthinkable that he had been attacked by accident, by coincidence. Yet that was what had happened. The BS men had set out to capture a truck, not to kill Germans. They had absolutely no idea who their victims were, still less that they had shot the highest SS official in the Netherlands. (In fact, it had all taken place so quickly that they even mistook the number of people in the car. They afterwards thought they had killed not three but four Germans.) They might have found out if they had searched the car for secret papers, but they did not think of that.

Suddenly, the dismayed BS men heard a vehicle approaching from the direction of Arnhem. Their Sten magazines were empty and there was no time to move the BMW off the road. Grabbing their bicycles, they quickly hid in the ditch on the west side of the road. A Wehrmacht truck pulled up beside the BMW. For a few seconds, it stood there, engine running. Then someone slammed a door and it rumbled off at speed towards Apeldoorn. (Rauter, who could only hear, not see what was happening, thought this was his attackers' vehicle leaving.)

For the second time, the Resistance men ventured out to the car. By now the light of the torch, its batteries almost flat, was fading. When again a vehicle was heard coming from Arnhem the frightened team decided the time had come to withdraw. As planned, they did not return to Apeldoorn, but went to their secret hide-out at Coldenhove camp-site, a few miles to the east. At the entrance to Loenen village, at the turn-off to Eerbeek near the De Eikelboom Hotel, a German sentry, mistaking them for men of his own unit, asked unsuspectingly: 'Are you cold, Franz?' Assuring him that he need not worry, the men quickly turned into the Eerbeek road and cycled on. Around 2.00 a.m. they arrived safely at their quarters at Coldenhove.

Meanwhile, back at De Woeste Hoeve, Rauter had still not been found. He was too weak to get out of the car. Blood was coming from his mouth and chest wounds and he was sweating profusely. All night he waited. Three times he heard lorries driving past and twice he tried to attract attention by firing his Colt into the night.

It was early morning, around 6.00 a.m., before he was found by troops with horse-drawn transport on their way to the Harskamp training grounds. A few minutes later, the inhabitants of the De Woeste Hoeve inn were awakened by agitated Germans demanding to use the telephone. Their call was the first news of Rauter's ambush to reach the German authorities at Apeldoorn. Immediately, the Reserve Kriegslazarett, housed in the buildings of the St Joseph-Stichting Hospital on Deventerstraat, was alerted and an ambulance sent to De Woeste Hoeve. Rauter, who had handed over his secret maps and papers to the men who had found him, was by now very weak from loss of blood and almost frozen from cold.

When he reached the hospital at 8.30 a.m., he was put in room No. 26 and immediately administered two pints of blood.

THE REPRISALS

Now the Sicherheitsdienst machinery was set in motion. First to arrive at De Woeste Hoeve was a two-man investigation team from the SD office at Arnhem-Velp. Shortly, it was joined by Hauptsturmführer Oscar Gerbig, SD chief at Apeldoorn. The SD men made a thorough search of the car, still with two bodies left in it, and of the ground surrounding it. Examination of the numerous cartridges found showed that they were of British origin and this suggested that organised Resistance was involved. Plaster moulds were made of all the tyre tracks found around the BMW. When Gerbig returned to Apeldoorn later in the morning, he found that another investigation team had been sent especially from the SD main office at Zwolle, and he went back to De Woeste Hoeve with them that afternoon. The Germans brought along some Dutch police detectives, and a police photographer, Jan Muda, was ordered to take a series of investigation pictures. An interrogation room was set up in the inn and the inhabitants and their neighbours questioned. The civilians, fearing reprisals against them (they had been told by one of the four Germans billeted in the inn, with whom they were on friendly terms, that Rauter was among the victims), denied having seen anything. Only one of them admitted he had heard gunfire in the night. None of them, however, was arrested.

After he was found, Rauter was taken to the St Joseph-Stichting hospital, on the outskirts of Apeldoorn, which had been taken over by the Germans and was then the Reserve-Kriegslazarett Apeldoorn. When this aerial photograph of the hospital and its grounds was taken in the 1960s, the wartime Red Cross roof markings could still be seen — they are not nearly as prominent today. (KLM)

The St Joseph-Stichting was and is a mental hospital. Rauter stayed in Room No. 26, but because photography might disturb the present patients it was not possible to obtain a picture. Brother Antonius Spronk who, as the hospital's cook, had to bring Rauter his meals, still remembers the secrecy and security with which the Germans surrounded the latter's presence in the hospital.

They were indeed lucky. In taking reprisals, the SD had a habit of including people who lived near to where an attack had taken place. In such cases, houses had been set on fire and the inhabitants executed. The BS team could be justly criticised for the fact that, of all the 18 miles from Apeldoorn to Arnhem, it had chosen a spot with three houses close by for its ambush.

That the locals came out of it unharmed was not an indication that reprisals were not to follow. What did follow were the worst reprisals of the entire occupation of the Netherlands, one of the most notorious war crimes committed in the country.

With Rauter himself out of action, it fell to SS-Brigadeführer Schöngarth, his Befehlshaber der Sipo und des SD and deputy, to take action. As soon as he heard of the attack, Schöngarth drove from his HQ at Zwolle to Rauter's office at Apeldoorn to learn more of what had happened. He then drove to De Woeste Hoeve and had a short look around there himself. Returning to Apeldoorn, he first went to see Gerbig at his office. Gerbig told him that the investigation was making good progress and was even able to produce a photograph of a probable suspect. Incredibly, it was a picture of Geert Gosens, who was well known to the Apeldoorn SD. In fact, Gerbig said, everything in the ambush pointed to Gosens and his gang and, he assured Schöngarth, his men were putting everything aside to hunt the man down. Taking the photo album of suspects with him, Schöngarth then went to the hospital to see his superior, who had already been visited by Seyss-Inquart earlier that afternoon. Rauter was still very weak and had difficulty talking. He told Schöngarth he was absolutely convinced that the ambush had been laid with the specific purpose of assassinating him. The number of his attackers he guessed at about six, but he could give a description of only one of them: the man whose face he had seen, he clearly remembered, had jutting-out ears. When Schöngarth showed Rauter Gosens' picture, he was sure he recognised the face.

Finally, in the late afternoon, Schöngarth had a meeting with Seyss-Inquart at the latter's headquarters to discuss reprisal measures. To the Germans involved, it was clear that such measures would have to be taken, regardless of whether the actual perpetrators were caught or not. An attack on the highest SS official in the Netherlands called for the severest punishment. After the war, Rauter claimed that when Seyss-Inquart and Schöngarth visited him in hospital he had implored them both to refrain from reprisals but, in

A remarkable before and after comparison: Rauter at the height of his power in 1941: and Rauter the defeated Nazi, still recuperating in hospital after the war. (RIOD)

view of Rauter's own previous record, this sounds highly unlikely. Yet it is not clear who exactly gave the order for them, or who decided how many and who were to be shot.

According to Seyss-Inquart at his Nuremburg trial, Schöngarth told him at the meeting that he had received orders from Himmler personally to shoot 500 prominent citizens but that he, Schöngarth, thought that excessive. He preferred shooting a smaller number and not innocent hostages but Todeskandidaten, prisoners who had been sentenced to death anyway. (Exactly how many he had in mind at that moment is, however, not clear. The most likely figure is 300: 150 to be shot at De Woeste Hoeve itself and 150 elsewhere in the Netherlands.)

Schöngarth, however, stated after the war that the order for the executions had come from Seyss-Inquart. In this he was almost certainly wrong: Seyss-Inquart was not in a position to issue orders to Schöngarth, who was part of the SS chain of command and did not come under the Reichskommissariat.

As for Himmler's part in this, the Reichsführer-SS was at that stage of the war Commanding General of Heeresgruppe Weichsel, fighting the Russians, and Schöngarth would have found it exceedingly difficult to contact him during the few hours he had at his disposal. Furthermore, if an order had come from Himmler personally, he would not have dared to change it. Perhaps he did telephone SS or Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, but it is most improbable that he talked to Himmler himself.

Of the four teleprinter messages concerning Rauter that are known to have been sent to Himmler's Sonderzug HQ during March 7, none came from Schöngarth. The first was from Blumentritt (wired at 2.15 p.m.), the others from Rauter's adjutant, Hauptmann Leissing (5.30 p.m.); a Waffen-SS general named Grawitz (6.15 p.m.); and, finally, from Seyss-Inquart (6.46 p.m.). None of these messages even mentioned reprisals and, more significantly, nor did Himmler in his only answering telegram, to Seyss-Inquart, the following day.

The most likely conclusion is that Schöngarth, and he alone, took the decisions but that, in order to share responsibility for them, he not only consulted Seyss-Inquart but pretended to him that he had received direct orders from Himmler. When Seyss-Inquart agreed to the decisions he had already made, Schöngarth could go ahead.

Earlier, he had already ordered Gerbig to prepare a list of candidates for execution held in Apeldoorn jails. Before leaving

SS-Brigadeführer Dr Eberhardt Schöngarth, Rauter's deputy and successor, who ordered the reprisals. (RIOD)

Apeldoorn, he now personally telephoned at least two of his other SD commanders, those at Deventer and Groningen, and ordered them to do the same. After returning to Zwolle, he delegated this job to his subordinate, SS-Obersturmbannführer Hans Kolitz. The prisoners from the northern and eastern provinces were to be brought to Apeldoorn and shot at De Woeste Hoeve, the others were to be executed where they were being held.

All through the evening and night of March 7, Kolitz made frantic phone-calls to various SD chiefs in the Netherlands. There were not enough Todeskandidaten available and Kolitz had to bargain with the SD chiefs for the number of victims they would provide. In the end, a number of prisoners were included who had not yet been sentenced to death or had only been arrested for petty offences.

SS-Sturmbannführer Willi Lages, the SD chief at Amsterdam, received a demand from Kolitz for 75 Todeskandidaten. Lages, however, had only 59 on hand — 53 in Amsterdam prisons and 6 in Utrecht — and Kolitz quickly settled for those. In the early morning of March 8, the 53 prisoners from Amsterdam were shot in the grounds of a tea-house by the name of Rozenoord, just outside the capital, along the Amstel river. Germans wielding rifle butts forced passers-by on the dike to watch the slaughter. The six Todeskandidaten from Utrecht were not executed in public but brought to Fort De Bilt, on the outskirts of town, and shot there.

The SD chief at Rotterdam, H. J. Wölk, when telephoned, explained that, in order to minimize attempts by the Resistance to liberate his prisoners, he had sent all his Todeskandidaten to his colleague at The Hague or to Amersfoort concentration camp. Wölk did have ten prisoners whose cases might make them eligible for a death sentence, but in spite of an urgent second call from Kolitz and one from Schöngarth's adjutant, Transfelt, he shirked from turning them over prematurely.

The SD chief at The Hague, J. H. L. Munt, was ordered by Kolitz to provide 80 victims. Munt had a mere dozen available in Scheveningen prison and he asked for the number to be halved, but Kolitz was adamant: 'It doesn't matter where you get them from,' he said, 'it's an order from the top and there's nothing to be done about it.' Munt racked his brains. The day before he had sent 49 of his and Wölk's Todeskandidaten to Amersfoort. At 11.00 p.m., he had his deputy telephone the Lagerkommandant and order these 49 to be shot. Now he needed another 31 and, in desperation, he finally decided that it would not have to matter whether they were Todeskandidaten or not. He knew there were a number of people in custody who had recently been arrested for looting after the large RAF raid on The Hague of March 3. At midnight, he went to Scheveningen prison and himself selected from this group 11 prisoners to be included in the reprisals. These 11, together with 27 Todeskandidaten which Munt had succeeded in scraping together, were shot on the nearby Waalsdorper dunes the next morning. At about the same time, the 49 inmates of Amersfoort were executed on the firing range just outside the camp. Thus, instead of the 80 prisoners demanded of him, Munt had topped Kolitz's order by seven . . .

The largest reprisals of all, however, were taken at De Woeste Hoeve itself. From prisons in Apeldoorn, Deventer, Zwolle, Assen and even as far away as Groningen, a total of 116 prisoners were collected. Many were real Resistance workers, but some had been arrested for nothing more serious than a breach of curfew. They were transported to De Woeste Hoeve in three buses and four trucks. Gerbig was in command of the operation.

At De Woeste Hoeve the Ordnungspolizei, about 150-strong, began arriving when it was still dark. The area was sealed off and a guard placed on the houses in the vicinity — preparations being briefly interrupted at 6.00 a.m. by a V1 which crashed in a nearby wood. At 7.45 a.m. the transports arrived and were parked on a side road. Gerbig had decided to execute the prisoners in five groups of 20 and one of 16. Each group had to await its turn. When called forward, one or two transport vehicles drove to the site of the so-called ambush and the prisoners, hands tied behind their backs, were ordered out. They were lined up, facing a firing squad of 40 men on the other side of the road. To each group, Gerbig read out the reason for the execution and a Dutch SD collaborator, M. Slagter, translated.

Before the shooting started, one member of the firing squad, an Oberwachtmeister from the Ordnungspolizei named Helmut Seijffards, refused to take part. He was promptly arrested and later executed himself. (His death has always been included in the number of those shot at De Woeste Hoeve, making a total of not 116 but 117.)

Shortly before 8.00 a.m., the first volley was fired. Each group took about five minutes to execute. Only one prisoner tried to make a run for it. He was Jan Thijssen, the national leader of the Raad van Verzet, the Council of Resistance. His attempt failed and he was shot with the others. One man fell dead into one of the pits dug by the Wehrmacht for protection against air attack. Not all the victims died instantly — at least four times SD men went forward and shot men through the head to finish them off.

At 8.15 a.m. it was all over. A long line of men lay massacred by the side of the road. Next to the bodies a notice was set up saying: 'This is what we do with terrorists and saboteurs', and for the next half hour anyone who happened to pass by was forced to get off their bike and read the sign.

At the Coldehove hide-out of the GG-Groep, sometime during the day after they had unwittingly shot up Rauter's car, news of the movement of prisoners and the rumour that they were to be shot at the scene of the attack reached Gosens and the other five. At once he decided that they had to try to liberate the prisoners. Gosens reasoned that if they opened fire on the execution squad, the prisoners might have a chance of escaping in the panic that ensued. The idea was of course totally unrealistic, but typical of the daredevil sort of man he was. On the morning of the 8th, with Stens and even Bren guns dismantled in the carrier bags of their bicycles, the men rode from their hide-out to a point east of the road, then followed a path that led them to the woods just opposite the De Woeste Hoeve inn. But they had arrived too late. The killings had already taken place, and all they could do was watch the Germans lining up the bodies in a neat row beside the road.

The number of those executed must have shaken the young Resistance fighters to the core. For they had planned to hijack a lorry and had not anticipated any reprisals at all; at the most they had by then perhaps learnt that Rauter had been in the car that they had shot up, but none of them could have envisaged retaliation on such a scale. Now

The reprisal shootings at De Woeste Hoeve took place just ahead of the spot where Rauter was ambushed and the memorial for the victims can be seen located exactly in the right place where the executions were carried out. When our author, Karel Margry, came to investigate the background to and the details of the reprisals, he made a study of the files on the post-war trials of some of the Germans involved, enabling him to reconstruct the precise turn of events surrounding De Woeste Hoeve and its aftermath.

Left: **Immediately after the liberation, a simple memorial was erected at De Woeste Hoeve to remember the victims of the reprisals of March 8, 1945. Later** *(above)* **the wooden plaque was replaced by a bronze one and trees and bushes were planted to create a more permanent monument. (Gemeentearchief Apeldoorn)**

they were suddenly confronted with the gruesome outcome. Heartbroken and disillusioned, the group retired to their campsite hide-out.

During the afternoon, the Germans started cutting the bonds of the corpses. A group of inspectors from the Apeldoorn police arrived to search the bodies for papers or any means of identification, but they had only just started when an order came from the SD at Zwolle that identification was forbidden. At 3.30 p.m. five lorries arrived and the bodies were taken away to the Heidehof Cemetery, at the village of Ugchelen, to be buried in a mass grave.

THE AFTERMATH

A total of 263 people had been shot in reprisal for the apparent assassination attempt. At first the occupation authorities made no mention at all of Rauter. The poster informing the Dutch people of the execution of 'several hundreds of terrorists and saboteurs' that was displayed in every municipality on March 9 was headed 'The Höhere SS und Polizeiführer announces', and referred only to 'a cowardly murder assault on the occupants of a German vehicle', without mentioning who the occupants were, or whether they had been killed or not.

Then, probably because the sheer number of people executed indicated that something out of the ordinary had happened and because rumours of Rauter's shooting could not be stemmed, the Germans decided not to suppress his involvement any longer, but instead to present it as if he had died in hospital. This version was widely believed, but not for long. News of Rauter's presence trickled out from the hospital and patriotic policemen passed on the results of the SD investigation to the outside. The clandestine newspapers were remarkably well-informed: lists of reprisal victims, Rauter's whereabouts, even the fact that his ambushers had been in German uniform and that his driver and orderly had been killed — all this was published in the illegal press within a short time.

The Dutch public was absolutely appalled by the number of deaths. Any joy over the elimination of Rauter was overshadowed by grief and sorrow over the killings.

Yet all this time, even within Resistance circles, it remained a mystery who exactly was responsible for the ambush. The clandestine paper *Parool*, for instance, wrote on March 17: 'It is meanwhile highly questionable whether the attack was carried out by Dutchmen. The leaders of the Resistance movement have not given orders for it. It is more likely that the business was organised by Rauter's enemies within the Wehrmacht or the NSB or that one of the many little groups of German deserters which roam the Veluwe, looting and stealing, is responsible.'

The origin of this lack of information from Resistance sources can be traced back to the high command of the BS. The Dutch Resistance leaders had long since decided that it

Left: **The poster announcing reprisals was put up in every municipality. It does not mention Rauter's involvement in the ambush and, by its opening sentence, suggests that he is still in office. Only the absence of his name, usually underneath in capitals, could be seen as a clue to what had really happened. Posters such as this were a sight which all too often registered the meaning of the oppression imposed on the people of the Netherlands. (Courtesy Verzetsmuseum Amsterdam)** *Right:* **Of those shot at De Woeste Hoeve, Jan Thijssen, 'Resistance leader', is special for two reasons: being the national head of the Underground organisation 'Raad van Verzet', he was probably the most important and highest ranking Resistance fighter executed at De Woeste Hoeve; and, of all the people brought to the place, he was the only one who tried to escape — a remarkable display of defiance right up to the end. Today, he lies in a family grave at the General Cemetery of Bussum.**

The victims of De Woeste Hoeve were buried in a mass grave at the General Cemetery 'Heidehof' at Ugchelen, just south-west of Apeldoorn (see map on page 7). Six weeks later, after the liberation, the bodies were exhumed and Police Inspectors Jan Muda and Sjoerd Adema were assigned the gruesome task of identifying them from clothing and personal effects found on the bodies. All but two of the 117 were able to be positively named. (Courtesy Muda)

was no use killing top Nazis, like Rauter or Seyss-Inquart, because they would always be replaced by someone else and murdering them would only cause large-scale reprisals. War criminals were to be brought to trial after the war. Furthermore, when reprisals occurred, the leaders feared the effect these might have on public opinion. People were always quick to call the Resistance 'a bunch of adventurers' who by their 'irresponsible behaviour' endangered the lives of innocent people. It was precisely for this reason that the commander of all the BS forces in occupied territory, Kolonel (Retd.) Henri Koot, had issued an order on February 14 specifically warning against such ill-motivated actions and stipulating that no more be undertaken unless specifically ordered.

So when the news of the De Woeste Hoeve ambush and reprisals reached BS Headquarters in Amsterdam, Koot and his staff were furious. Like the Germans, they thought that a deliberate attempt had been made to kill Rauter. Enraged, Kolonel Koot immediately sent a special messenger to BS District 6 to ascertain more details.

Geert Gosens, however, had already dutifully reported the exact circumstances of it all to the Geheime Dienst Nederland, one of the largest underground spy and communications networks in the country. But it seems that this initial report never reached Amsterdam.

The second report was made by the District Sabotage Commander, G. J. Numan. It had been one of his subordinates, the Local Sabotage Commander at Apeldoorn, who had given Gosens the fatal order. By now, however, the whole affair was rapidly becoming a controversy, threatening to discredit the Veluwe Resistance. Rather than attempting to explain that it had all been an accident and that nobody could have foreseen the disastrous consequences, the final

After examination and identification the bodies were either reinterred or returned to the families of the deceased. Today, the largest number of De Woeste Hoeve victims still buried together is at the National Cemetery of Honour at Loenen, built by the Dutch War Graves Commission and inaugurated in 1949. Of the sixteen buried here, only three miles east of the place where they were massacred, nine lie in Plot E, Graves 1249 to 1257.

Grave 1254 — 'an unknown Dutchman' — one of the two victims never identified.

Rauter, his jaw still deformed, seen here in April 1948, at the opening session of his trial before the Special Court of Justice in The Hague. (RIOD)

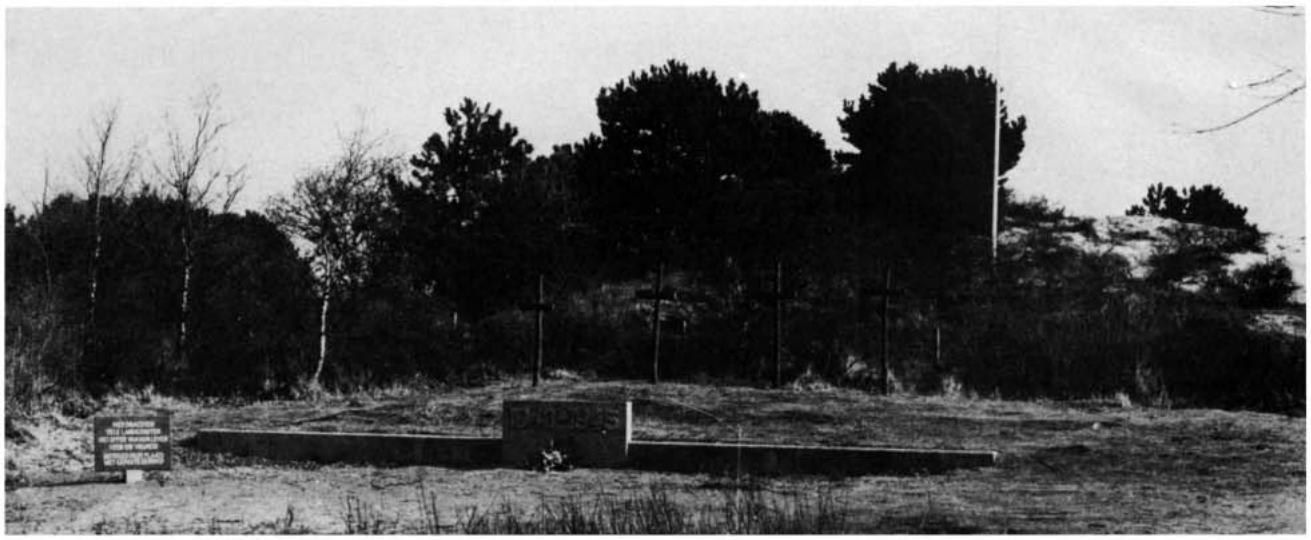
The spot beside the Amstel river where the 53 victims of the Rauter reprisals from Amsterdam were shot, publicly, on the morning of March 8, 1945. In the last months of the war, several such executions took place on this site called 'Rozenoord' after a nearby tea house, and the memorial, erected in 1969, is dedicated to all who fell here.

report simply stated that no blame was attached to the Veluwe BS for what had happened. It failed, however, to make clear whether this applied solely to the reprisals or also to the attack on the car which happened to be carrying Rauter, and thus gave a definite impression that the BS was responsible for neither. BS Headquarters in Amsterdam, however, taking the report at face value, did not ask any further questions and decided to let the matter rest until after the liberation, when the matter was re-examined.

Rauter survived the war. After two lung puncture operations, he was moved to Groningen on April 1 and from there to northern Germany on the 13th. On May 11, 1945, he was arrested by British Military Police in a hospital at Eutin. During captivity he underwent a bone transplant operation on his jaw. He was still recovering when, on February 6, 1946, he was turned over to the Dutch authorities to be tried for his four-and-a-half years' reign of terror. He was brought before the Special Court at The Hague on April 1, 1948, and on May 4 he was sentenced to death. He appealed to the Special Court of Cassation which on January 12, 1949, confirmed the sentence. Petitions for clemency — not from Rauter himself — were turned down and on March 25, 1949, he was executed.

Schöngarth, who in the final analysis was responsible for the Rauter reprisals, appeared before a British military court in 1946 on another war crime charge and was hanged.

The small firing range inside Fort De Bilt, where the six Todeskandidaten from Utrecht were shot. The monument was unveiled in 1949. Today, the fort is still in use as a Marechaussee barracks and, when this picture was taken, special action police squads were undergoing pistol training on the nearby shooting range.



Throughout the war, the Waalsdorper dunes, across the road from Scheveningen prison barracks, were used by the Germans to execute Dutch patriots, burying them on the spot. As part of the Rauter reprisals, 38 prisoners were shot here at 8.00 a.m. on March 8, 1945. Untied, some refusing to be blindfolded, they had to lean against poles in groups of four. The firing squad — 20 men from III. Schutzpolizei-Bataillon — was commanded by a Leutnant Paasch. After the war, several hundred bodies were discovered in these dunes. The monument and a memorial bell were inaugurated in 1959. The ceremony held here on the evening of Dutch Remembrance Day, May 4, is always broadcast on Dutch television.

Of the men who shot up Rauter's car, two, Karel Pruis and Herman Kempfer, died before the war ended. Exactly a week after the hijacking that went wrong, while transporting arms from Coldenhove, they ran into a German patrol and were killed. Sepp Köttinger returned to Austria after the liberation and has since died. The other three are still alive today, Henk de Weert and Wim Kok in the Netherlands and Geert Gosens in Australia. After the war, the controversy surrounding the affair continued unabatedly and therefore Gosens and his team members decided to bring the matter into the open, taking the responsibility for what had happened. The historian, J. Middelbeek, published their account in a book about the Apeldoorn Resistance in 1946. Although incomplete, it remains a basic source for historians.

Immediately after the liberation of Apeldoorn in April 1945, a simple wooden cross was erected at De Woeste Hoeve a few yards from where Rauter's car was shot up, in remembrance of those executed there; and at Amsterdam, at Utrecht, Amersfoort, and on the dunes near The Hague, there are memorials too where others were shot — victims of massive retaliation for an unintended ambush.

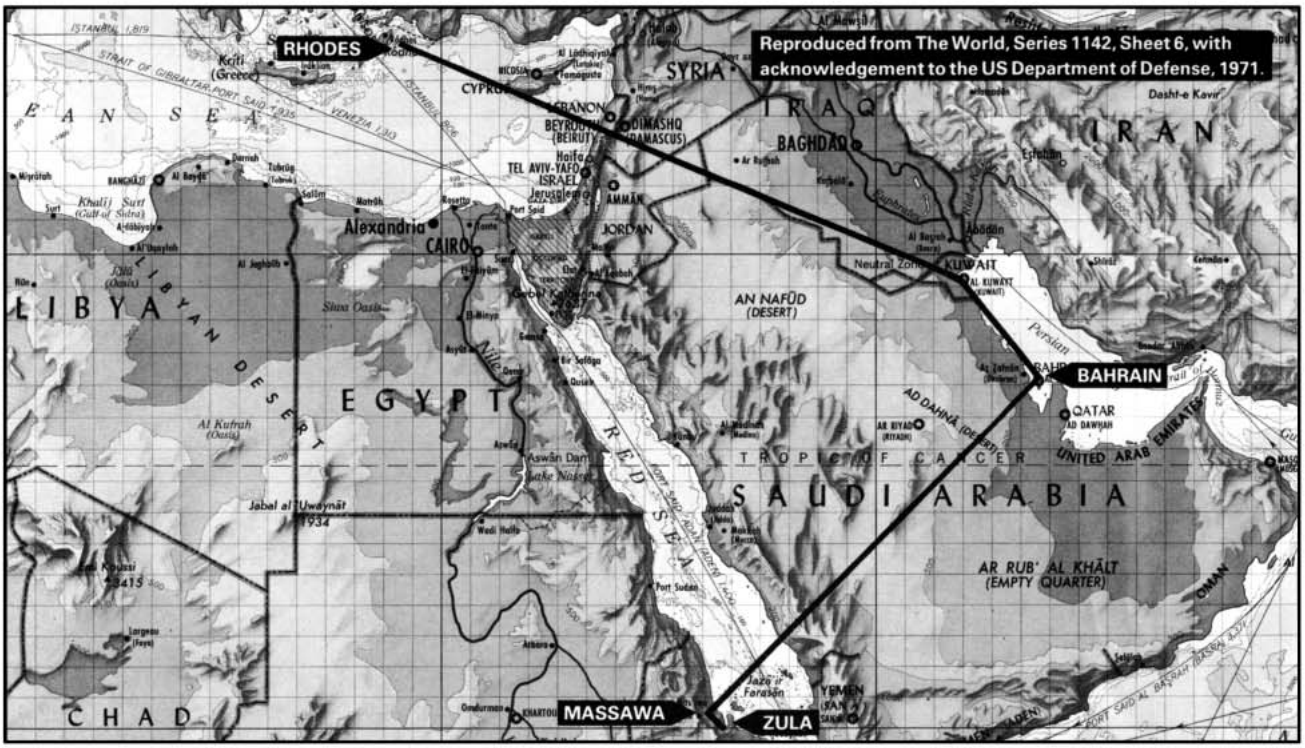
Forty-nine inmates of Amersfoort concentration camp were included in the reprisals. On the morning of March 8, they were brought, in six separate groups, to this hollow road firing range, just outside the camp. Lagerkommandant K. P. Berg read out the reason for the execution to each group before giving the order to fire. The statue of 'Man before the firing squad' by Frits Sieger was unveiled in 1953.

In 1979 the De Woeste Hoeve memorial site was again reconstructed and the original wooden cross replaced by a new one. To this day, the plaque continues an error made in 1945: the '117 patriots murdered by the German usurper' in fact includes one German: Oberwachtmeister Helmut Seijffards who, after refusing to take part in the shooting, was himself executed and buried alongside the 116 Dutchmen.

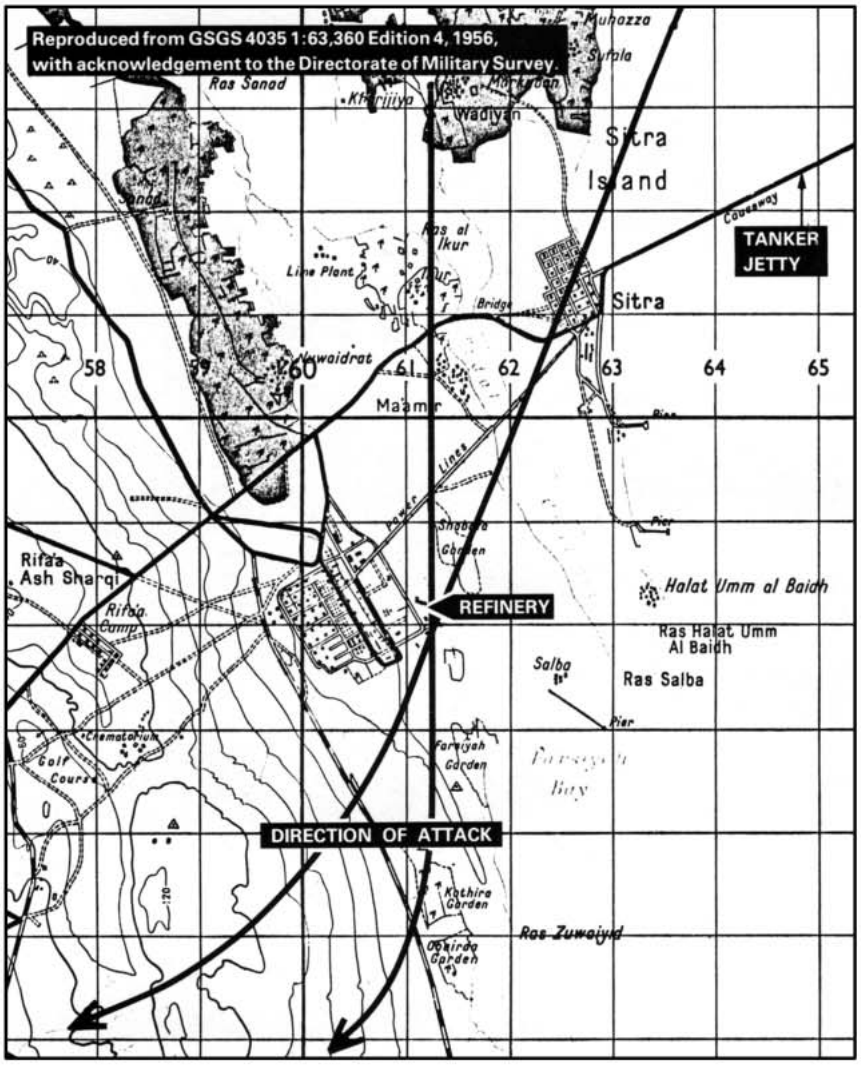
THE ITALIAN RAID ON BAHRAIN

BY KEVIN PATIENCE

The fuel gauges registered less than forty gallons remaining when at 8.40 a.m. on October 19, 1940, four Savoia Machetti SM 82 bombers of the Regia Aeronautica touched down at Zula airfield, in Italian Somaliland, on the east coast of Africa. They had flown a round-trip of nearly 3,000 miles — fifteen and a half hours aloft — their target the oil installations at Sitra, on the island shaikhdom and British protectorate of Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf. It was no mean feat, an audacious, long-distance raid by the standards of the time — but not the success that the Italian Broadcasting Service claimed the following day with the announcement that 'Bahrain has been destroyed'. In fact a bomb plot drawing made at Sitra within a few days of the raid, and unearthed in the refinery records, serves to corroborate the brief entry to be found in the government gazette report for the period February 1940–41: 'Bombs were dropped in the neighbourhood of the refinery by Italian aeroplanes. No damage to persons or property.'



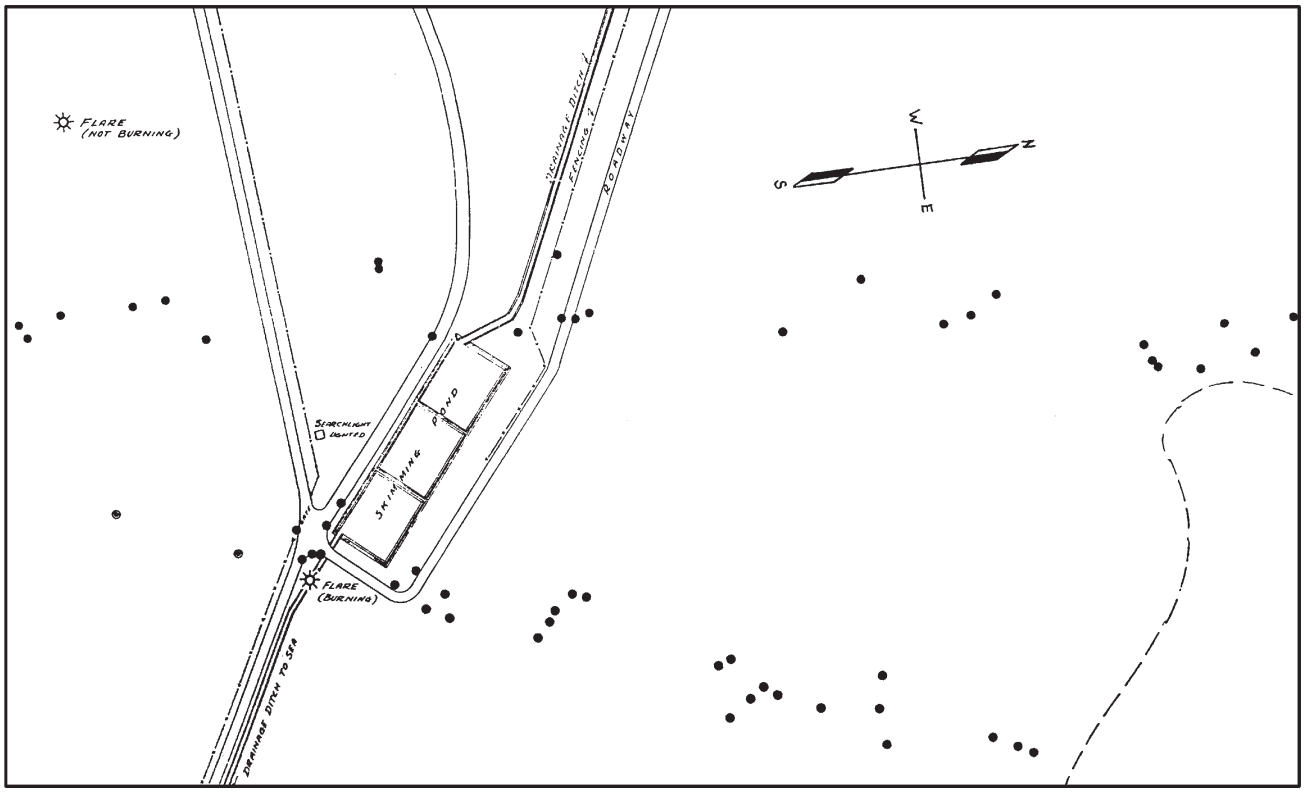
Top: **It would be nice to be able to caption this picture as having been taken on the actual raid! It is, in fact, a shot of a somewhat larger formation of SM 82s over the Mediterranean Sea later in the war.** *Above:* **Map showing the route taken by the four SM 82s to Bahrain on October 18-19, 1940. The incredible journey of nearly 3,000 miles over sea and desert took fifteen and a half hours — with only forty gallons apiece remaining in the fuel tanks on landing!**



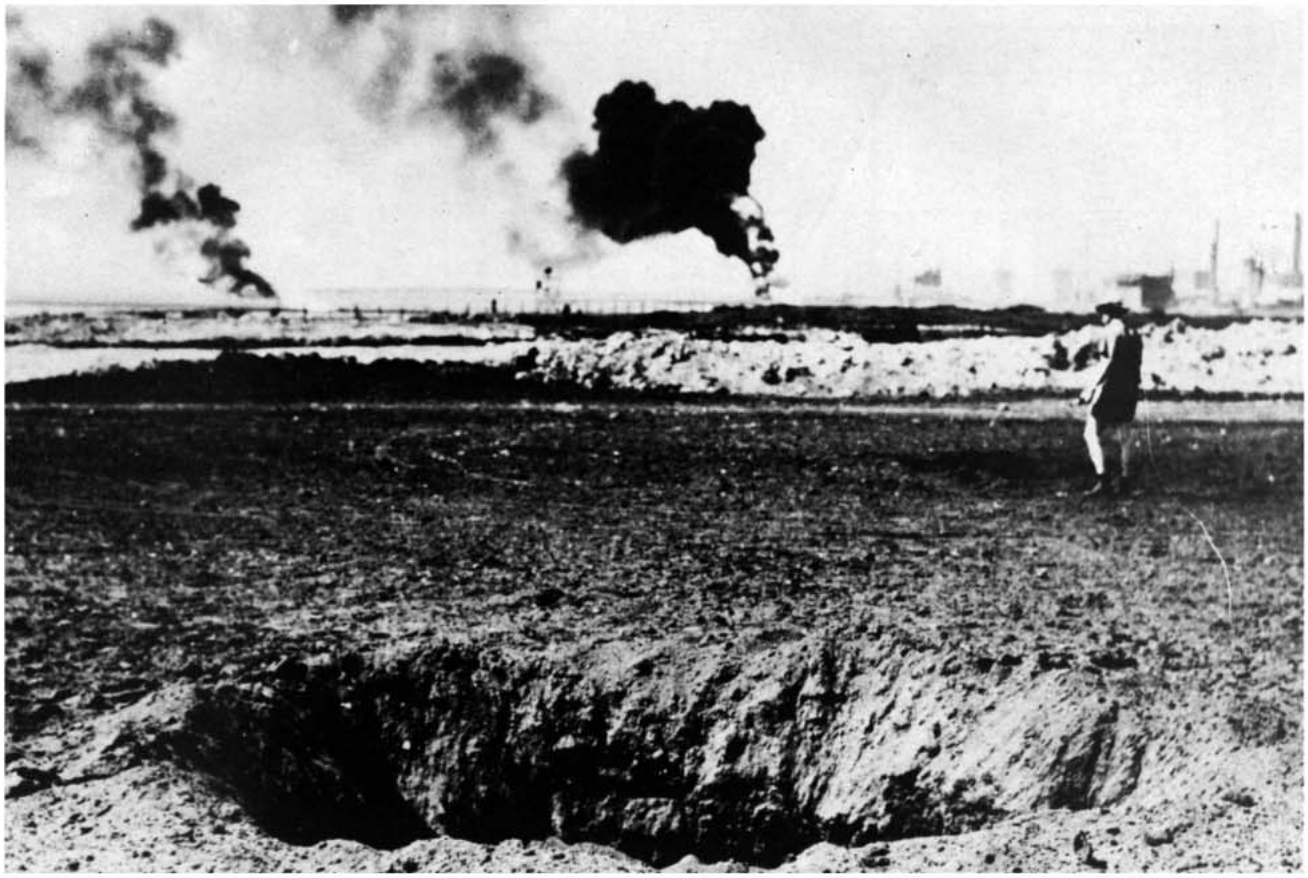
The mission was led by Major Ettore Muti, one of Mussolini's favourites. He was Secretary of the Fascist Party and a General of the Fascist Milizia.

Oil had been discovered in Bahrain in 1932, and by 1940 an output of just over a million tons of crude oil a year was being processed at the refinery. Britain's Middle East oil supplies then included ten million tons a year from the Iran oilfields and some four million from Iraq. The concessionary rights in Bahrain were in the hands of an American company, Standard Oil of California, but the British government enjoyed pre-emptive rights to output in time of war. The oil served as a source of supply for the convoy escorts of the Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean.

The raid was masterminded by Captain Paolo Moci, now a retired former Chairman of the Italian Civil Aviation Directorate but at the time a test pilot at Guidona (the Italian equivalent of Farnborough). With Mussolini's approval, it was to be led by Major Ettore Muti, a high-ranking Fascist leader. The four SM 82 bombers belonged to 41° Gruppo, two each from flight numbers 204

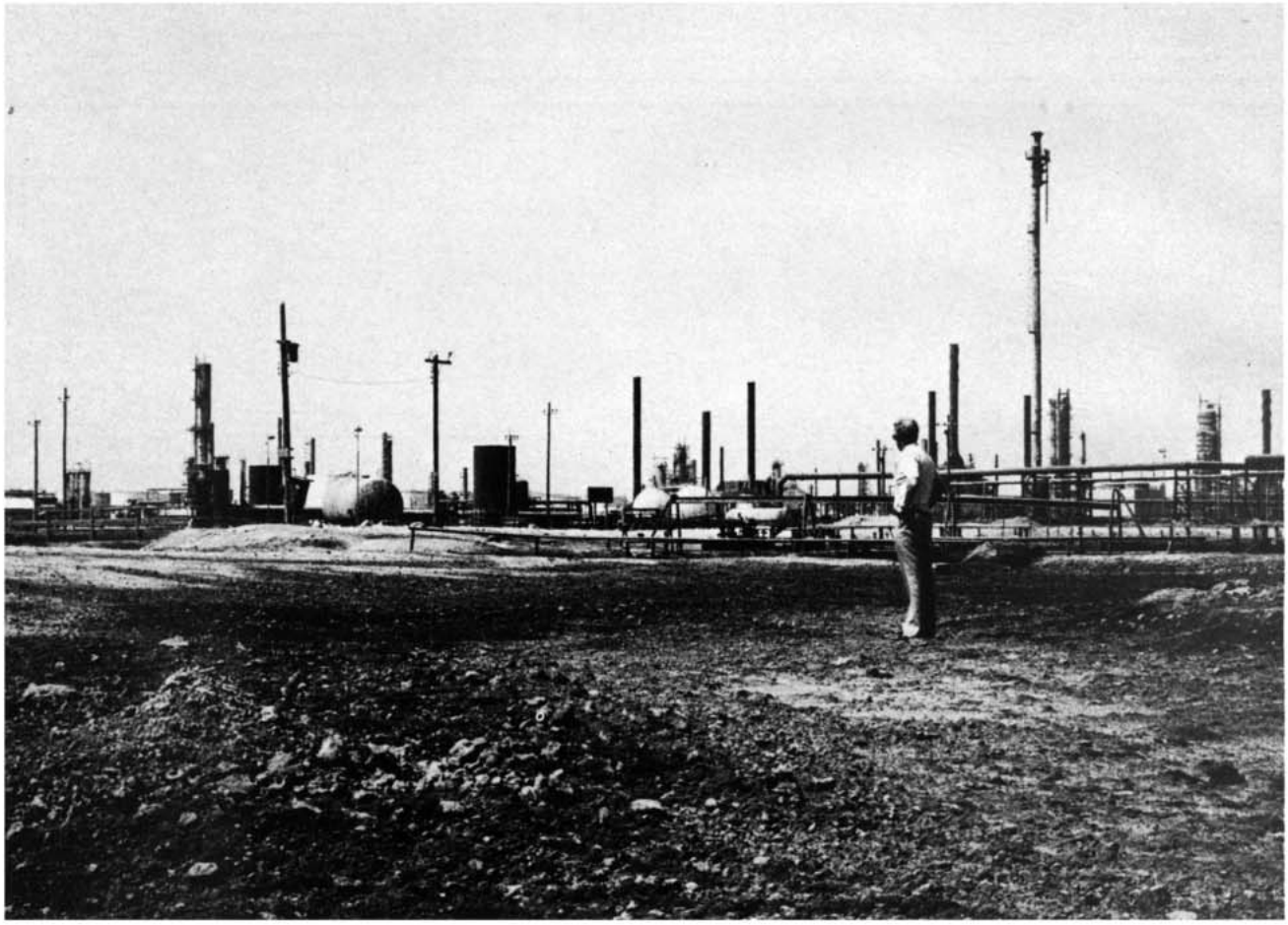


This bomb plot drawn a few days after the raid, discovered in the refinery records, clearly shows the path of the bombers.



This is the only known photograph of the results of the raid, showing a Bahrain Petroleum Company engineer beside one of the bomb craters with fires still burning in the background.

Forty odd years later, another BAPCO engineer surveys the results of the expansion programme that has been underway since 1940.



and 205. The SM 82 having an all-up weight of eight tons, they were nearly a ton overweight with extra fuel and a bomb load consisting of sixty-six 30lb bombs as they struggled into the air at 5.10 p.m. on October 18 from the island of Rhodes, in the Dodecanese. Captain Moci flew as second pilot in the lead aircraft, each having a crew of three.

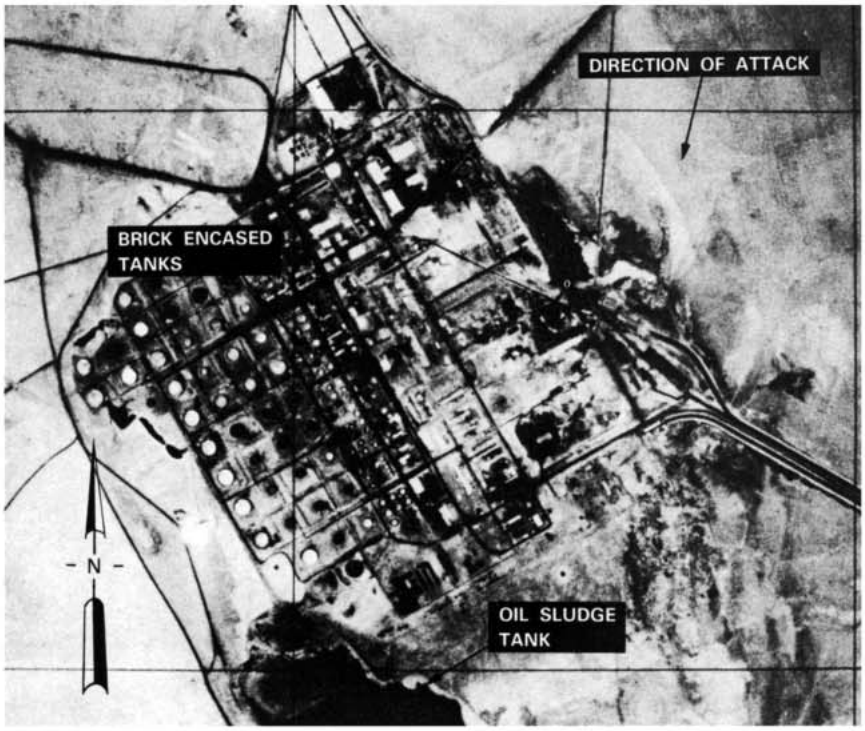
After crossing the eastern Mediterranean, as they approached the coast of Syria visibility decreased and soon visual contact was lost with the fourth aircraft. Radio contact was maintained for a time but eventually faded. Over Damascus the three aircraft climbed to 10,000 feet but continued poor visibility led Moci to deviate from his planned route and head directly for the coastline of the Persian Gulf. Having crossed Iraq and identified Kuwait they followed the Saudi Arabian coast south to Bahrain.

In the darkness of the early hours, they were approaching the northern tip of the island when suddenly, to the east, the airfield lights at Muharraq came on — ground control assuming the raiders to be friendly. Using the airfield for reference, it was only a matter of minutes before they swept over the southern perimeter of the refinery at 2.20 a.m., some nine hours and ten minutes into the mission.

Of the ninety-two bombs they dropped, eighty-four exploded in a jagged line across the desert between two gas flares. The fires that the Italian crews reported they could see for hundreds of miles as they left the scene were presumably the result of the prompt action of the General Manager who quickly had the flares turned up full to simulate ground fires. The refinery emerged unscathed. Of the unexploded bombs, five were not discovered until after the war when the extensive coke tip was removed to allow for the refinery expansion programme.

The three aircraft then crossed the island towards the Saudi peninsula, heading for home — Massawa, in Italian Somaliland. Meanwhile, the fourth aircraft had also followed the coastline from Kuwait, seen the gas flares of Dhahran refinery, on the Saudi coast, and promptly released forty bombs, all of which fell in the desert, doing little more than rupture a water main and an oil pipeline.

Next morning, in the absence (as in Bahrain) of any such luxury as a bomb disposal unit, the question of what to do with a few unexploded bombs was solved by the simple expedient of attaching a rope to them, hitching them up to a truck and towing them around the desert until they went off!

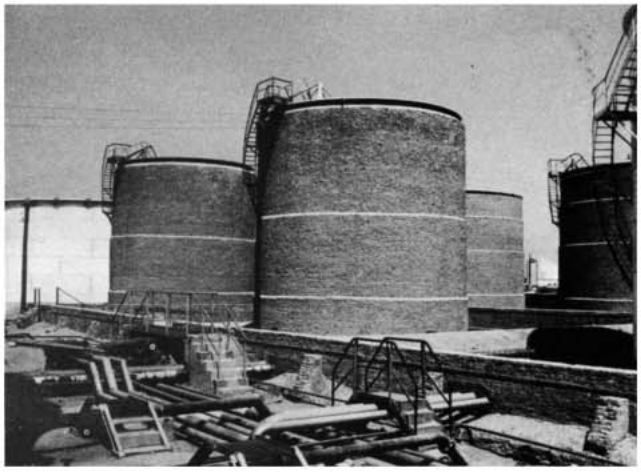


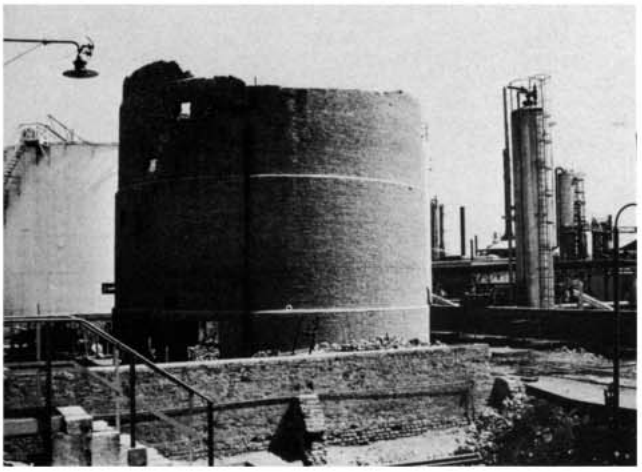
Aerial photograph of the refinery taken in 1950 by Fairey Surveys.

During the flight across the peninsula the stray aircraft finally caught up with the formation. Because Captain Moci had anticipated the possibility of their having to make a forced landing at this stage if they ran too low on fuel to make it across Arabia and the Red Sea to Africa, he had asked for a standby SM 82 loaded with fuel to be on call at Massawa, but in the event they managed to fly on. With fuel now running low, while crossing the Red Sea, however, Massawa informed the returning aircraft that an RAF air raid was in progress there, which meant that they had to divert some thirty-five miles to the south, to Zula. A tail wind on the leg to Bahrain had been allowed for; even so, at an indicated airspeed of 175 mph they had made it none too soon with a mere forty gallons to spare.

The four bombers subsequently returned to Rome via Benghasi, attacking Port Sudan, up the Red Sea coast, en route. Major Muti was decorated for his part in the bombing of Bahrain, a raid which must be considered something of a record when the distance and type of aircraft are taken into account.

The effect of the raid was of course to demonstrate that the refinery was not beyond striking distance of the Axis. Anti-aircraft guns were consequently installed around the perimeter and anti-blast walls erected to protect the oil storage tanks — measures that are still in evidence today: on the ridge outside the fence where the remains of ack-ack positions can be seen, while at least two of the protective walls have yet to disappear.





Left: **In early 1981, the blast walls around the storage tanks were still intact but** *(right)* **by the end of the year, the demolition of the last traces of the wartime defences had begun. Four aircraft of the 41st Bomber Group took part in the raid — from Flight 205, the first aircraft was piloted by Major Giovanni Raina with Captain Paolo Moci (who had planned the details of the mission) as second pilot. Major Muti flew in this aircraft as the third crew member. The second aircraft from Flight 205 was crewed by Captain Giorgio Meyer, Lieutenant Adolfo Rebez and Sergeant Aldo Carretta. The other two aircraft came from Flight 204, the first being piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Federici with Lieutenant Buzzanca as second pilot and Lieutenant Ruspoli as third crewman. The second Flight 204 aircraft was piloted by Captain Zanetti with Lieutenant Cecconi and Sergeant Badii completing the crew. During the flight over the desert, a film was taken of the sunrise above the sandy plains — believed to be the first such motion pictures ever to have been taken.**

THE BATTLEFIELDS OUTSIDE WARSAW

BY BOGUSLAW PERZYK

The battles on the Eastern Front which ravaged a million square miles and brought a death toll conservatively estimated at more than thirty million lives were fought by Germany and the Soviet Union with a bitterness born of no quarter given or expected, no assurance of humane treatment if captured.

Poland, sandwiched between East and West, has long been a European battleground, not only for her domestic conflicts but those of her neighbours, and the graves of soldiers of many nations — Prussia, France, Russia, Austria and Sweden — are a grim testimony to past clashes.

For more than ten years, Boguslaw Perzyk, a 26-year-old land engineer from Warsaw, has been exploring the Polish battlefields of the Second World War. On the surface it may appear that all has now been cleared away, but, as Boguslaw's extensive explorations show, the illusion is only temporary as the earth yields forth secrets. Not surprisingly (if only in view of the sheer size of the opposing forces), it is not just artefacts that come to light, but occasionally the remains of those whose bodies disappeared beneath the soil thrown up by high-explosive and in collapsed dug-outs and filled-in foxholes — their number including those whose remains were not accorded the sort of formal burial taken for granted on the Western Front.

Boguslaw tells the story of his interest in exploring the former battlefields around the Polish capital from the time he was a youngster, and to put it into context he creates this brief imaginary setting:

'Amidst flame and smoke a 132mm Katyusha rocket, one of many, left the self-propelled launcher of the Russian 94th Rocket Artillery Regiment positioned at the edge of a wood east of Olesin. As the projectile reached the peak of its trajectory, it arched high above the glittering line of the Brodno Canal that traversed the wet meadows below. Where the ground halted its descent, the hot cylinder, half empty, half filled with TNT, buried itself in the wet earth. Thin, razor-sharp splinters shattered the trunks of the already mutilated 100-year-old pine trees growing on the western slope of Hill 101. Earth, blasted into movement by the force of the explosion, trickled down between the beams of a dug-out roof, falling onto the face of the still form lying below. Unteroffizier Paul Kapitan came to. Over an hour ago a shell splinter had crushed his thigh bone, and now his left leg, bound with two rubber tourniquets, lay like a log on a bed of grass and twigs. Exactly five years earlier he had begun his war service here in Poland as a soldier of the 13. Motorised

Top: **German 1939 propaganda shot of Wehrmacht troops removing the Polish eagle from a border barrier during the 1939 Blitzkrieg advance. By 1944** *(above)* **the tables were turned and the sight of derelict and destroyed German armour in Polish woodland was a common sight — a Mk IV seen here being passed by a mounted Russian soldier.**

The first discoveries by Boguslaw Perzyk on the Choszczowka battlefield, outside Warsaw, in July 1978 included a Russian helmet badly holed by shrapnel — a pathetic and yet graphic reminder of the bitter carnage once waged across the whole of eastern Europe during World War II. When Boguslaw returned to the forest in May 1986, he found that a huge forest fire in 1982 had removed the last scars remaining from those terrible years, reminding us that even in the East, both time and the development needs of a new generation will heal the wounds of war.

Division and now it seemed that it was coming to an end here near Warsaw. He had been wounded before (he had plenty of scars to show for it and the Verwundetenabzeichen shining black on the chest pocket of his uniform), but this time the wound was fatal — there was no chance of saving the leg. The dull pain was coming back, a sign that the anaesthetic was wearing off. Though the first-aid point was located in a neighbouring dug-out several dozen metres down the trench, there was no one he could send there. The few remaining soldiers manning the position were busy preparing the defences. The artillery fire was subsiding so he struggled to make his way to the poncho-covered entrance in order to call a medical orderly. He adjusted the hand grenade and ammunition pouch on his belt and, using his MP-44 to help him keep his balance, he grabbed at the poncho to pull it back.

'An ear-splitting explosion shook the roof of the dug-out and one of the falling pine logs crushed his skull. A bright shaft of light and the smoke-shrouded sky were the last things his mind registered.'

That is how I imagine the death came about of one such soldier during the fighting on the outskirts of Warsaw in September 1944. Did it happen that way, just as I have described it? In your mind's eye you might visualise it differently. My mental picture draws its inspiration from a synthesis of historically documented facts and ten years or more of exploring the ground over which the Soviet and German forces fought. In the absence of eye-witness accounts or personal recollections, any reconstruction of what happened at some particular spot must naturally remain fictitious, open always to the subjective influence of the imagination — but what is an interest in exploring World War II battlefields and hunting for artefacts without imagination! For anyone who is at all serious about it, knowledge and research heighten the thrill of discovery; even so, there is no denying that stimulus when the mind is sent racing back in time by the unearthing of a relic from the scene of battle, which sparks off (for want of a better way of putting it) a 'situational interpretation' of the location and the find. If there is no way of knowing how close one comes to reality, that surely is part of the fascination of it all . . .

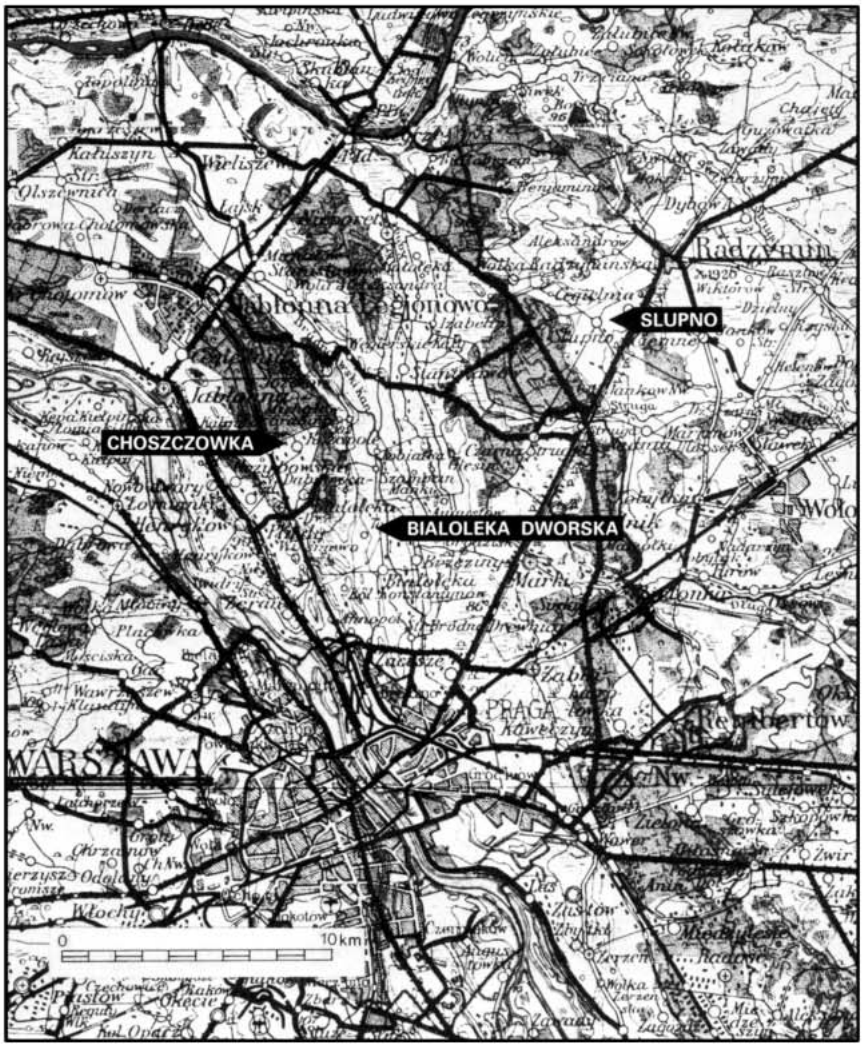
AN AWAKENED INTEREST

It was a warm July afternoon in 1970. Together with a few of my friends I was waiting at a bus stop beside some woods on the edge of northern Praga. Tired after a day of running around in a wood full of trenches and dug-outs I was sitting on a bench and kicking the ground beneath with my foot when suddenly I uncovered several rusty and bent cartridge-cases. For a ten-year-old boy such a find was, to say the least, reason enough for joy; but for me it was much more than that. I was by then already interested in palaeontology and archaeology but the fields of interest of these two subjects seemed too remote and any success too difficult to attain for my curiosity to reach beyond the sphere of imagination. Since my interest in the past also included all things military, that first find consituted a melting pot in exciting my imagination concerning more recent events. Although I was not aware of it at the time, those cartridges which I held in my hand were like seeds which fell on fertile but dry soil.

A year later I tried to return to that same wood. Unfortunately I got off at the wrong bus stop and ended up in a different one, which, to my extreme satisfaction, was literally covered by trenches and foxholes. Wandering among the pine trees I moved deeper and deeper into it. Suddenly the trees disappeared. I was standing at the edge of a large clearing surrounded by the burnt-out stumps of young trees. The scorched earth was covered with sparse yellowish grass. The whole area was dotted with bomb craters and criss-crossed by trenches. Hundreds of shell fragments lay on the sandy, burnt ground, glittering dully in the orange rays of the setting sun. The parapet of the trench was littered with cartridges, while the remains of an exploded missile stuck out of the ground nearby. The silence that enveloped the site of the fire, and the rust-eaten cartridges that crumbled in my hand, bore witness to the

passing of time since the events which took place here. I returned home with a handful of metal shell splinters. The avalanche of impressions was like rain on a desert and the seeds began to sprout. Today, those fragments and impressions are the only remainders of a now non-existent trench-covered clearing, for towards the end of 1972 the burnt-out wood was cut down and the whole area was ploughed over. In September 1982 a second fire destroyed the 'clearing' together with several dozen hectares of surrounding trees. Two years later another large part of this, the Choszczowka battlefield, where I took the first childlike steps in my digging 'career', ceased to exist. I smile when I recall those early faltering steps of mine, with spade in hand, searching in bomb craters and returning home empty-handed after long hours of wandering in a forest. I was neither able to dig down deep enough nor interpret the finds — each foxhole seemed to be a closed enclave since I lacked the breadth of awareness that brings together the overall picture to which such individual elements belong. But I still cherish the memories of those times when, for the first time in my life, I held in my hand a helmet found in the grass or a grenade jacket which rolled out from under a heather bush growing on the side of a trench.

Already in the early 1970s finding any World War II artefacts lying on the ground was a rare experience. I acquired not only objects but information. In my teens I began to become interested in fortifications and in any information concerning pillboxes, shelters, dug-outs, forts, etc. One of my schoolfriends told me that while he was mushroom picking with his family in a wood in the vicinity of Struga he had found a concrete bunker in the forest. After his next trip to the same area he added that next to the bunker there was a road littered with metal fragments and other war remains. To back up what he was saying he showed me several cartridges and the detonator of an exploded shell. In the late autumn I found myself some two kilometres or more north of Struga walking down one of the sandy roads that cut across wooded hillocks and lead to large meadows. An earth-filled trench ran at right angles to the road. I ran zig-zagging down the trench, ankle-deep in leaves. A few hundred metres further on, the trench cut into the steep slope of an elongated hill. Through the trees was a view of the fields and meadows that lay beyond. Time and again I saw Y-shaped firing positions. Walking over a kilometre down the trench, however, I was disappointed not to have come across any sign of the pillbox.



A general view of the Warsaw area, showing the three main battle sites, taken from 1:300,000 WIG of 1933.

Sometimes the relics to be found are of a somewhat more deadly nature — a German Eierhandgranate 39, still very much alive after forty-odd years on the forest floor on Hill 97, part of the Choszozowka battlefield.

During the winter I received new information. A friend of mine told me that near Bialoleka Dworska he had discovered a hill littered with rifle ammunition and that he had even seen field telephone cables ingrown among the surrounding trees. Since it was the beginning of the school holidays we had more than enough free time. After walking a few kilometres along snow-covered roads we came to the hill. I looked at it and saw that it was covered with various niches. This moon-like landscape, shrouded with snow, looked interesting but at the same time barren . . . It is really barren now, after the extraction of a few hundred kilogrammes of steel.

I have described my first encounters with the three best-preserved battlefields on the outskirts of Praga. At the time, as a teenager I spent hours and hours wandering about those battlefields with my eyes glued to the ground looking for the smallest bits of metal and dreaming of finding even the smallest part of a weapon. Had I been able to X-ray the ground with my eyes I would have seen how close I was to fulfilling those dreams. Without knowing it, I walked down trenches that were filled not only with equipment and ammunition but also . . . human bones. Before describing my later findings it would be best if I were to outline here the background to the events of 1944.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

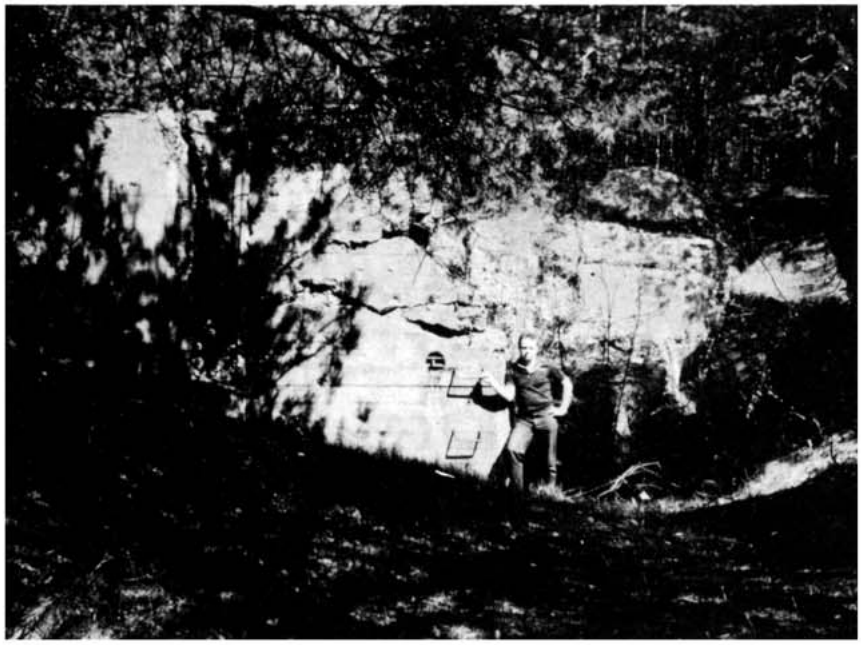
Praga, the Warsaw suburb situated on the right bank of the Vistula, lies in the Warsaw Depression, a feature formed by the activity of the Vistula and Bugo-Narew rivers in the Quaternary period and by eolithic processes. The syncline which falls gently from the east to the west is folded by groups of sand-dunes which in some areas join together and form ridges many kilometres in length. Apart from the dunes, the terrain is covered with deflationary synclines forming wide strips of land, intersected by ditches, which hinder traffic and transport. The depression cuts its way between the fork of the Vistula and Bugo/Narew rivers. The third side of this marshy triangle is made up of a sand-dune embankment. In the nineteenth century, when the mobility of armed forces increased and battles were more dispersed, as tactical flexibility was attained, the defensive advantages of the area became evident. This accorded with the significance of Warsaw as the capital of Poland, an important economic centre and the country's largest transportation centre. According to the Russian military doctrine, the Narew/Vistula line was to constitute the main defensive position incorporating the Warsaw/Modlin/Zegrze triangle of forts. Around 1890 a plan was drawn up to close the triangle by building six forts

between Zegrze and Warsaw. In 1905 the Russians decided to move the main defensive line eastwards, outside the territory of the Polish Kingdom. By then, however, three forts had already been built, two of which were dismantled after World War I. In September 1915 the area around Warsaw was occupied by the Germans. The Germans anticipated a Russian counter-offensive in the direction of Warsaw and in the autumn of 1915 a number of modern field fortifications were built in a network system of small dispersed bunkers. The southern sector was furnished with concrete shelters, while the remaining sectors were equipped with wood/earth and corrugated sheet-metal shelters. In 1918 the fortifications were partially dismantled; then in 1920, the Red Army having moved back into Polish territory from which they had been ousted in the First World War by the Germans, they were renovated by the Poles and used as a rear defence line in the war against the Soviets, who reached these positions in mid-August.

After the fall of Poland in September 1939 and its partition between Germany and the Soviet Union, in 1940 the Germans decided to build new fortifications based on the Narew, Vistula and San rivers to serve as bases for the attack against the USSR. Since the Germans intended these fortifications to be of an offensive character they planned six bridgeheads on the eastern banks of the rivers, the Warsaw bridgehead being the largest. Roads for transporting the necessary building materials were laid that same autumn. Construction proper began in the spring of 1941 but by May a halt had been called as the concentration of forces for Operation Barbarossa went ahead unimpeded. Out of the eighty 'B' works, seventeen were built. The machine gun casemate with a 200mm armour shield and a persicope was to be the main element of the fortifications; of the seventy-two planned only twelve were built. The second basic element was the type 120a artillery observation shelter, four of the five being completed. Several hundred wood/earth or corrugated sheet iron infantry shelters were built along the entire length of the 80-kilometre sector. The avenue of approach to the positions was protected by a continuous line of barbed wire fastened to steel posts, by anti-tank obstacles of various kinds, ditches, hedgehogs, etc.

The fortifications remained unchanged until 1944. As the Soviet summer offensive forced the Germans back, on July 22 of that year Hitler ordered that Warsaw was to be held at all costs. Guard units and engineers, using the local populace for labour, began to build up the area. Plans were made to reinforce the positions with light combat field positions for which prefabricated elements were massed at all railway stations. The Germans just managed to create a line of trenches and lay narrow minefields when two events occurred which thwarted their intentions. The first of these was the start of the Warsaw uprising on August 1, which disorganised the German rear and engaged considerable forces.

The giving of the signal for the beginning of the uprising was dependent on what was happening on the other side of the Vistula. On July 18, after a short pause, the Soviets had resumed their attack. The First Byelorussian Front thrust in the direction of central Poland, its mission being to reach the Lublin-Bialystok line. The Second Tank Army, on the left flank of the Front, reached the Vistula on July 26 in the vicinity of Deblin and Pulawy (the Army's commander, General S. Bogdanow being wounded in the battle for Lublin and replaced by his Chief of Staff, General A. Radzijewski). Due to the Army's unforseen successes it received the order to attack Warsaw. The grounds of this decision were both of an operational and political nature. What those responsible for



Built as part of the offensive-type fortifications for the German attack on Russia — Operation Barbarossa — this particular bunker, a heavy machine gun casemate, still survives today, covering the approaches to Hill 104 on the Slupno battlefield. It was partly demolished by the Russians, immediately after its capture when the Germans abandoned their main positions on the approaches to the river.

issuing this order failed to take into account was the fact that the Germans paid special importance to the military significance of Warsaw. That was the first substantial mistake. The second, which decided the outcome of the whole operation, was the way in which the Second Tank Army became separated ahead of the main forces. On July 27 a reconnaissance unit reached the forward area of the southern flank of the approaches to the river. Taking advantage of this surprise manoeuvre the Soviet units captured the southern part of the fortifications, stopping only after reaching the outskirts of Praga. Here the Soviet 16th Tank Corps took up defensive positions, with the VIII Tank Corps to its right near Okuniew. The III Tank Corps was the most successful, taking Wolomin and Radzymin, but its attack bogged down, its left flank glancing off the defences approaching the river. The Germans took hold of the situation on August 1, being reinforced with units of the 4. Panzer-Division, 19. Panzer-Division, Hermann Göring Parachute Panzer Division. 3. SS-Panzer-Division 'Totenkopf' and 5. SS-Panzer-Division 'Wiking'. The forces had become equal, with about a thousand tanks and SP guns about to be engaged in the third largest tank battle of the Second World War after Kursk and Falaise, which took place between August 1 and 5 on the outskirts of Praga. The III Tank Corps was surrounded and almost totally destroyed; the Second Tank Army lost almost 300 tanks. German losses were equally heavy — about 250 armoured vehicles.

Meanwhile the Soviet Forty-Seventh Army (General N. Gusiew) had reached Praga and relieved the Second Tank Army. It took more than a month for the right flank to make a wide arc and, after recapturing Radzymin, encompass the approaches between the Vistula and Bugo/Narew. Commanding the German forces defending the bridgehead under IV. SS Panzerkorps was Gruppenführer Herbert Gille, the main elements comprising the 3. SS and 5. SS-Panzer-Divisions and the Hungarian 1st Cavalry Division. To the north of the Soviet Forty-Seventh Army, the Seventieth Army (General A. Popov), supported by units of the Second Tank Army, took up positions.

At the beginning of September, the Soviet XVI Tank Corps was sent to support the Warecko/Magnuszew bridgehead while the III Tank Corps was sent to the rear. Between September 5 and 6 the Soviet forces came to a halt in front of the German fortifications and went over to the defensive in preparation for the start of a general offensive on September 10. The direction of the main thrust was evident — a nine-kilometre-wide sector hastily fortified by the Germans between the Vistula and Milosna Stara. The remaining forty kilometres of the front line ran from Milosna Stara to the Bugo/Narew along terrain dominated by fortifications. Units from the First Polish Army, whose task was to capture and hold the centre of Praga, were assigned to the Forty-Seventh Army. A difficult rôle was given to the Seventieth Army, which by carrying out a supporting attack between Wolka Radzyminska and the Warsaw/Radzymin road was to deceive the enemy as to the direction of the Soviet main effort. One of the units of the 58th Tank Brigade of the VIII Tank Corps was to bypass Praga from the south along the Zabki-Bialoleka line and capture the northern bridge over the Vistula, while the rest of the brigade were to move forward and capture the railway and road junction in the vicinity of Jablonna/Legionowo, thus cutting the area into two. The main objective of the VIII Tank Corps was to capture the bridges in the Modlin fort. Finally, the long-awaited morning of September 10 arrived. Opposing one another in anticipation of the impending battle, along a fifty-kilometre-wide front, the Germans massed about 30,000 men, 1,000 artillery guns and mortars, and 280 tanks and SP-guns; the Soviets over 100,000 men, 3,500 artillery guns and mortars, and 264 tanks.

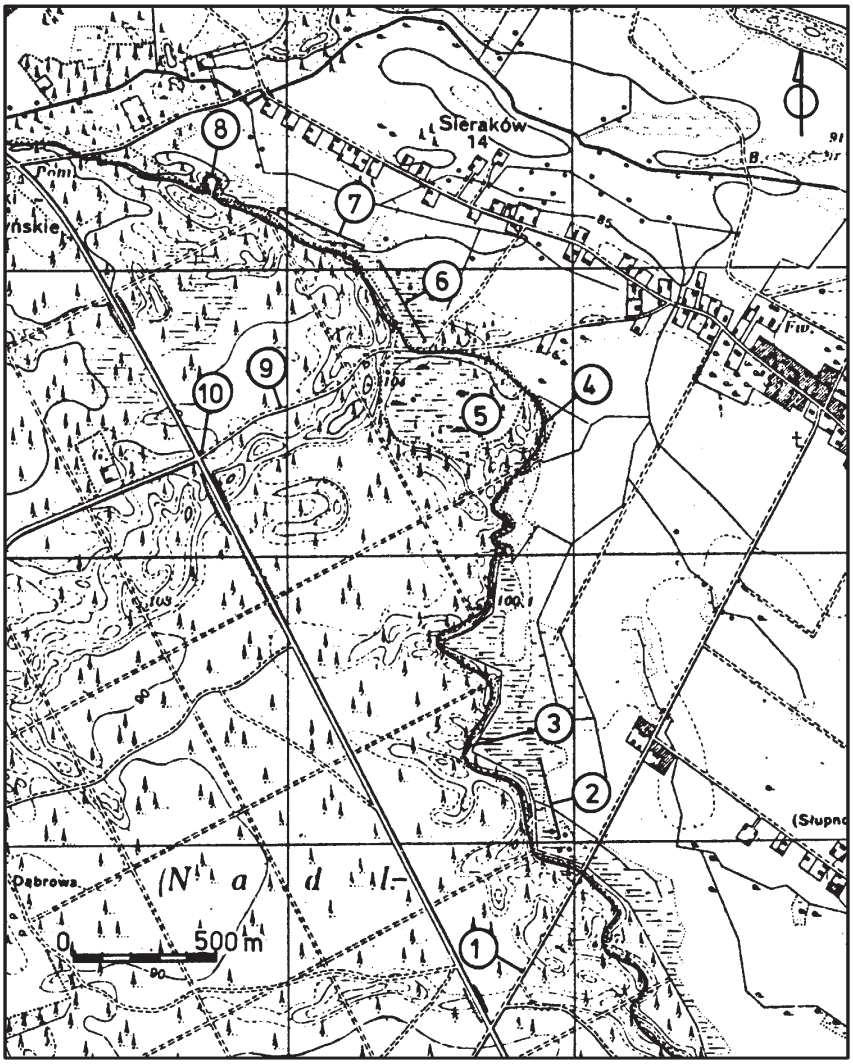
EXPLORING THE GERMAN POSITIONS OVERRUN SEPTEMBER 10-15

By taking September 10 — the opening of the general offensive along this part of the front — as a starting point for this account, the earlier tank battles at Radzymin and Okuniew are presented later, not necessarily as an afterthought but because the fighting was of a typically mobile character, taking place around suburban districts surrounded

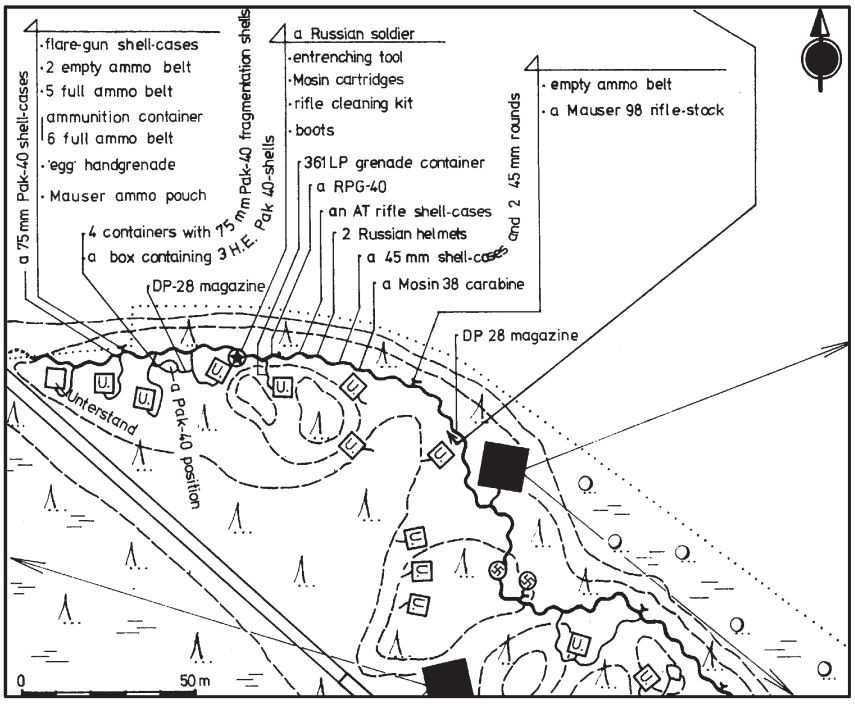
by fields, meadows and small groves, where the ground had little chance of swallowing up the remnants of battle. The last burnt-out tank hulks vanished in the early 1950s, while anything else was removed by the local inhabitants, and a few reconnaissance digs thereabouts turned up nothing. The same applies for the battlefield near Miedzylesie, where the defensive positions of the 73. Infanterie-Division were overrun although, here, whatever was left has virtually disappeared beneath the ever-growing number of flats being built.

The area of an unsuccessful breakthrough attempt conducted by the Seventieth Army near Slupno, on the other hand, has yielded a multitude of finds. A number of reconnaissance trips between 1975 and 1977 enabled me to get acquainted with the general topography of the battlefield, and I began systematic digs in the area in the spring of 1978. Since 1977 I have always been accompanied by Andrew, whom I met in high-school. Andrew's specialities are light infantry weapons and ammunition, and artillery ammunition. The two of us were joined in 1979 by Zbyszek, with whom I went to primary school. Several years of 'digging' together have cemented our friendship to such an extent that during all this time the membership of our team has remained unchanged.

On May 27, 1979 we stood on the top of a long sand-dune behind the 'first sandy road'. In the weeks that had passed since the last time we were there the surroundings had changed considerably — the trench and parapet were covered in a carpet of green. Hundreds of mosquitoes from the marsh at the base of the dune attacked us with undwindling fervour. One of the first thrusts of the wire probe hit a ZB-26 magazine. We came upon a position in the middle of the hill. Hundreds of expended cartridges indicated that it must have led the most intensive fire. We had partially dug up the position in April. Apart from ten aluminium flare-gun cartridge cases and the front part of an ammo belt we would not have discovered anything of interest had it not been for a piece of metal rod lying at the entrance. After a quick inspection it turned out that the 'rod' had a calibrated groove and at one end a muzzle sight — the 'rod' was the end of a Mauser 98k barrel. At last the first sign of a weapon. If the barrel had been blown off, what were



Above: **The Slupno battlefield, with the outline of the German trench, based on a WIG 1:25,000 scale map of 1934. 1: the 'first sandy road'. 2: 'Mauser Hill'. 3: the valley. 4: the bunkers. 5: the bog. 6: the hill. 7: the embankment. 8: the promontory. 9: the 'Shell Road'. 10: the crossroads.** *Below:* **Detailed sketch map of the positions around the bunkers with the finds and their locations marked.**



the chances of finding the rest of the rifle? Andrew stubbornly maintained that it must be somewhere in the left branch of the Y-shaped position where the gunner usually stood. Despite the fact that we had checked the position previously, he picked up the wire probe and began to thrust it into the ground inch by inch up to its full length. Suddenly, in the middle of the position, from about 60 centimetres down, we heard a metallic sound. Our hearts began to beat faster, but maybe it was just a large shell fragment? Andrew took the small spade and dug a narrow hole just wide enough to put your hand in and check what was lying there. With the tips of my fingers I could feel that whatever the thing was it had a definite shape, so it could not be a shell splinter. A few minutes later I pulled out an earth-encrusted Mauser rifle with the decayed remains of the stock still in place. The end of the barrel was missing — we had found the complete rifle! We put the find in a bag and decided to move on. The trench wound its way gently down the slope of the dune into a flat valley enclosed by a second hillock. Here we came across a few positions from which the Germans had directed flanking fire towards the approaches to the hill we nicknamed 'Mauser Hill'. At the end of the 'valley' we found a wiped out MG position. Empty ammo belts lay among expended casings. A bullet-riddled container for two

MG-34 barrels lay by the right wall of the position. We looked for the barrels but found only shell fragments and empty food tins. A shell probably scored a direct hit on the position and that was why its contours were so blurred. We found a lot of evidence for the accuracy of the Soviet fire, such as empty oilcloth first-aid packets.

At 9 o'clock on the morning of September 10, 1944 the Russians began an hour-long artillery barrage. The results of this artillery strike are most visible in the spring. Over an expanse of several kilometres the marshy bases of the dunes are covered with craters of all sizes, usually filled with water. The majority of the shells that were fired had direct impact fuses so that the wet, marshy dunes absorbed the brunt of the explosions. We came to a large bog at the base of Hill 104 but failed to find anything and rested for a while beside a couple of bunkers. When the bunkers were built, a concrete road almost a kilometre long had been laid, joining the Struga/Nieporet road. The whole surface of the road bore the marks of exploding shells. At one point the remains of a Katyusha or Nebelwerfer projectile protruded from a crack. After the artillery switched its barrage to the German rear the Russian infantry began its attack. Smoke grenades helped to shield the troops from the murderous machine gun fire and enabled them to cover the open space between their own trenches up to the barbed wire. Engineers led the infantry groups. Special assault teams made up of over thirty engineers wearing bullet-proof chest plates and equipped with sub-machine guns, hand-grenades, explosive charges and flame-throwers captured the bunkers. A violent attack carried out by the three Russian divisions drove the Germans from their positions for six kilometres of the line between Wolka Radzyminska and the Warsaw/Radzymin road. The Russian penetration was stopped along the Struga/Nieporet road. Despite the fact that both sides received reinforcements throughout the night and the following day, neither achieved success. It was not until September 12 that a fifth German counter-attack reached the main positions, driving the Russians back to where they had started from.

Until 1984 a wooden tower stood on the top of Hill 104 from which on a clear day you could see the whole of the battlefield, with blocks of flats on the outskirts of Praga behind. Next to the road near one of the bunkers we dug out a rifleman's foxhole. There I discovered the answer to the strange fact that we failed to find any cartridge shells in the majority of the positions we searched over. The answer was to be found in the 'two layers' phenomenon. The original layer of shells covered the floor of the position, while a second layer, made up of shells that had once lain on the parapet, was usually to be found at a depth of 0·2 to 0·5 metres. Thus, if the parapet had been 'clear' and my probe was 0·6 metres long then the positions passed for empty. As we dug down into a foxhole, we usually got down to about chest level before the first rusty shells crunched under our feet. While digging, I uncovered a German helmet — the first to be found on the Slupno battlefield; then, shortly after Andrew took over, his spade brought up not just sand but some human ribs. The remains of the helmet's owner lay just under the top — or first — layer of soil. From where the pockets of his now non-existent uniform had once been, we found a few Mauser cartridges and a tooth-brush. The finding of the first weapon and the first human skeleton increased my hopes of discovering many interesting objects in the positions which up to now had guarded their hidden secrets.

The battlefield around Choszczowka absorbed us to such an extent that we did not reach Slupno until three months or so later. Being more experienced we brought along a metre-long probe. In one of the positions on 'Mauser Hill', which we had previously dug over, we found a gas mask still in its canister and the fragments of a German stick grenade. The remaining positions each yielded at least a handful of ammunition. We began to check the five positions in the 'valley' once again. Before very long, in the first one the probe disclosed the existence of larger objects. I began to dig and Andrew started to prod around the next hole and also came across something. Though the mosquitoes were having a field day and the sweat was pouring down our faces, I went on digging a narrow hole and reached the floor of the position. I found two German helmets. One had a shell splinter entry hole. The probe thrust sideways produced another dull scraping sound: an ammunition case with four empty ammo belts. Andrew dug up a German ammunition pouch and a Mauser rifle breech. Prodding in the entrance to an MG-34 position I discovered another German helmet with a shell splinter entry hole.

This modern-day photograph, showing the open ground between the German and Russian positions gives a graphic impression of the total lack of cover available to the attacking Russian infantry, who were partly shielded from prying German eyes by smoke screens. The Russian positions were in the outskirts of Sierakow, visible in the background. About half-way out, ran an anti-tank ditch and barbed wire entanglements; taken from a German MG 42 post.

A week later I went back to continue going over the remaining battle positions. The Y-shaped positions were located wide apart and the majority of them were empty. At last, in a large position on a small promontory the probe indicated that there was something below. Six Russian helmets! Some of them damaged. Five of them were the earlier three-rivet type produced only until 1941. The stocks of these helmets had quickly dwindled and by 1944 they were only to be seen here and there. I never came across another one. I went over the rest of the positions leading to the bunkers on the following Sunday but without much success.

On the afternoon of September 10, 1944 the Russians captured the crossroads of the Slupno/Stanislawow and Struga/Nieporet roads. This not only provided a way forward for tanks and armoured vehicles but also enabled larger forces to break through the woods to join up with the VIII Tank Corps attacking Legionowo. The Germans heeded the danger and sent several tanks and SP-guns from 3. SS-Panzer-Division 'Totenkopf' which effectively held back the advance, but they were unable to regain the crossroads. During one of the Russian attacks an infantry battalion of the 160th Infantry Division supported by six tanks penetrated the German defences and reached Stanislawow, where it was surrounded.

We decided to 'look over' the crossroads on October 14, an exceedingly warm and sunny day. They have changed somewhat since the war. The level of the road has been raised and a car parking area has been built. On the eastern side of the road we found many Russian foxholes. Andrew started to explore to the left of the road, and I to the right. On my side there was a dune on which the positions were completely filled up with sand. Very soon, in the first one I discovered the remains of a canvas breadbag, or 'myeshok', with Mosin cartridges, an RGP-40 hand-grenade and a Mosin rifle cleaning kit. On Andrew's side of the road the ground was wet and all the positions had well defined contours, but his finds — three boxes of Mosin cartridges, two boxes of TT pistol ammunition, RPG-40 and RG-42 hand-grenades, two entrenching tools and three kettles — were in a sorry state. The left side of the road offered better prospects, so we started going from one position to the next. We came across what amounted to several small stockpiles of artillery shells: all told, nine 45mm fragmentation rounds and almost twenty 76mm fragmentation and AP shells, all separated from their cases. We also found a few unexploded German 81mm shells, full MG ammo belts and Russian hand-grenades. We returned to the crossroads. Thrusting the probe into a foxhole almost on the road itself, the jolt nearly broke my wrist when the wire hit something metallic near the surface. It turned out to be part of the rear armour-plate, including the towing hook, of an SU-76.

The following week we began working our way over the other side of the road. The road passes through fields and runs through a wood with a bog on its left and an unnamed hill on its right. The German trench ran in front of the bog and climbed along the 'hill' on the other side of the road. The 'hill' is covered by a mass of bomb craters and positions. The day belonged to me! Andrew was fed up because he had failed to prod out anything during the first few hours. Literally in the first position on the top of the 'hill' I prodded out an ebonite cup from a German water bottle and . . . a Wehrmacht field policeman's breastplate. The breastplate was in excellent condition — still bearing the remains of woollen cloth and phosphorescent coating. But how did it get to the front line? There were few cadre units in the IV. SS-Panzerkorps and these received support from various Wehrmacht formations, field

Left: **A very good reason for the name 'Shell Road' — a selection of anti-tank shells and 75mm fragmentation shells together with fragments of a destroyed Marder self-propelled gun.** *Right:* **Our author, Boguslaw Perzyk, holds the gunsight and spanner from a Russian ZiS-3 76mm cannon compressed into the shell road by vehicle tracks.**

police among others. I put the prize in my bag and a minute later was busy digging into an MG position. I came across a multitude of spent cartridges, plus something I had long been looking for — a 30/1 Gew.Spr.Gr. Previously near the bunkers we had spotted evidence that these rifle grenades had actually been used, for in one of the positions we found more than twenty cartridge cases spent in firing them, and aluminium casings from 326-LP grenades in another. Andrew finished digging out the position while I uncovered the skeleton of a Russian soldier in a deep hole on the east side of the top of the 'hill'. Next to him I unearthed an entrenching tool, rifle rounds and a pair of shoes. At the bottom I found a sapper's spade and an MP-40 magazine with British cartridges. After crossing to the right side of the road, we came across whole groups of empty foxholes. Finally we unearthed a Russian helmet shot clean through and five 76mm AP rounds and further fragments of a destroyed SU-76 in the shape of bits of armour plating and a piece of track.

During our next visit to the area we continued digging in the same direction. Unearthing an MG position in a trench at the base of the 'hill' we discovered an MG-42 barrel container, a folding entrenching tool, empty ammunition belts, an egg hand-grenade and flare pistol cartridge cases. Near the hole where we came across the remains of the Russian infantryman we found a second skeleton. On its belt it had German ammunition pouches with Mosin ammunition and an entrenching tool in a canvas cover, while in the remains of something which was once a pocket we found a wallet with some tattered bits of paper. By the roadside we discovered a Maxim ammunition box and several 76mm shells, together with yet more pieces of an SU-76: cables, nuts and bolts, etc. Next to an optical sight container we found two T-Mi-42 mines. Two weeks later we found further mines — defused S-Mi-35s — at the edge of the small marshes at the foot of the hills.

Most of the shells without cases and nine fragmentation shells that we found by the road had been hit by shell splinters and been discarded by the artillery because of damage of one kind or another. The vast number of shells lying about everywhere were the 'left-overs' of the artillery support provided for the attacking infantry. After the war those shells which were not cleared by the engineers cleaning up the battlefield were removed and defused by the local villagers and scrap-iron collectors. We found foxholes filled to the brim with the gunpowder from dismantled shells. All in all, during our 'digs' along the road we found over 200 45mm, 76mm and 75mm shells of all types. As a result we named the area the 'shell road'. A German mortar battery was dug in on the western side of the crossroads. The battery covered the approaches, the positions in the vicinity of the 'hill' and the 'shell road'. This battery probably fired all the unexploded shells we found thereabouts. Coloured flare cartridge cases we found in the positions at the foot of the 'hill' were in all probability the residue of an artillery spotter who had directed the fire of the mortar and other batteries. In one of the positions under a caved-in slope we found a stock of neatly piled shells, and in another a really huge amount of red-painted 81mm ammunition — altogether, over 100 shells.

The last 'fruitful' trip to Struga took place on November 25. I had the luck that day —in contrast to Zbyszek, who failed to find anything interesting. One of the positions on the 'hill' gave up just a few cartridge cases, but that was made up for by other finds: an MG ammunition box, empty ammunition belts, egg hand-grenades, a Mauser cleaning kit and a Mauser 98k in beautiful condition except for a little rust in some places. The Russians had left a carton with anti-tank rifle ammunition and an RG-42. Zbyszek and I walked down the trench until we came upon a secluded dune that bulged in front of the line of hills, which we named the 'promontory'. Here we identified three machine gun positions. The contours of the northern position had withstood the passing of time best. Previously we had found an MG-34 barrel container and now we unearthed several empty ammo belts and over twenty Leuchtpatrone cases. We came across a number of small bones at the entrance, and uncovered the skeleton of an SS-man, probably the victim of a Russian 82mm mortar bomb, the remains of which we found among the cartridge cases. The right hand was missing and the bones bore the signs of minor injuries. Even his identification tags were hit by a stray shell splinter. The remains had been picked clean. The only part of the uniform to have remained intact were the synthetic fibre shoulder straps. There were a few rounds of ammunition and an egg hand-grenade.

Unearthing the skull of an SS soldier killed by shellfire in the trench between the hill and the embankment.

At 1.00 a.m. on September 13, 1944 the Russians once again broke through the main German positions. In the late evening one of the attacking battalions reached the crossroads. A strong German counter-attack pushed the Russians back to their main line, which they managed to hold. Behind the Russians were minefields and engineer obstacles and had the Germans managed to push them back enough the Russians would have been sitting ducks. On the morning of the 14th the Russians mounted a concentrated attack and captured Hills 100 and 104 and once again reached the crossroads. On their right flank the Germans managed to take back Hill 100 and almost reach the bunkers. During the night the Germans pulled back the 5. and 3. SS-Panzer-Divisions to defensive lines along King's Canal.

We continued our exploration of the area during the winter and the spring of 1980. This time, however, we had a metal-detector to help disclose the 'riches' buried in the ground. On the 'hill' in the places which we had failed to explore previously we found a multitude of cartridge cases, together with damaged magazine drums, several PPSz breeches, German gas mask containers and mess tins, Russian entrenching tools and kettles, a Maxim breech, an anti-tank rifle, flare pistol cartridge shells and telephone cables. In one of the Russian foxholes in front of the trench we found ammunition boxes with full Maxim ammo belts. We also unearthed further human remains. In a trench linking a dug-out on the western side of the 'hill' we found the skeleton of a Russian infantryman who had died with his face up against the side of the trench. His helmet had been crushed by an exploding shell and there was a big splintered hole in the region of the right eye. He still had RG-42 grenades hanging from a canvas belt. Several metres further on we discovered another infantryman — a helmet, a belt with German ammunition pouches, an RG-42 and shoes. Most of the Russians wore American Army boots. In a trench running in the direction of the 'promontory' we came across both Russians and Germans. Some of the skeletons were still wearing their helmets but most of their weapons had been removed. Beneath one of them — a Russian by his helmet — was a Mosin 44 rifle. Having dug up a number of rifles we were dreaming of finding an MG, but the bigger the item the smaller the probability of its survival. On the 'hill', near the road, we discovered the remains of a destroyed armoured vehicle which was armed with a 75mm gun and an MG: pieces of armour plating, AP ammunition, a crushed MG-34 suspension point, burnt ammo belts, rubber dampers and other odds and ends. In one of the German dug-outs on top of the 'hill' we uncovered what was left of woollen uniforms, the fibre top of a woollen Bergmütze, three ammo belt boxes and Mauser pouches. Next to the 'shell road' in front of a Russian position full of cartridge cases we unearthed a machine gunner's myeshok with a German mess-tin, shaving equipment, oil can and Maxim cleaning kit. In other foxholes we found a leather map-case and a rare item — a Russian gas mask (finding a Russian gas mask or anti-chemical equipment is unusual because up until 1943/44 Russian soldiers regarded such items as unnecessary and simply threw them away). The surrounding bomb craters were full of shells. We even found a metal ZiS-3 ammunition pallet with all of the shells damaged by shell splinters. We also found signs of a hasty Russian withdrawal after a German counter-attack: in a large heavy MG firing position we discovered DP magazines, three cases with full ammo belts and one belt still threaded through a Maxim belt feed. We were glad to have come across something that did not require tedious cleaning.

Boguslaw proudly displays the 75mm fragmentation shells and their containers found near the main trench. Due to the airtight qualities of the containers, the rounds were in perfect condition, complete with paper labels.

In February we suddenly came up against competition! Jurek and Leszek are two elderly gentlemen but with whom, due to shared interests, we are on first-name terms. They specialise in digging up battlefields of the September 1939 Campaign, but in order to 'keep their hands in' they had decided to 'work out' on the battlefields of 1944. From where I was standing on the 'dike' I saw them on the 'hill' sweeping their Heathkit metal detectors from side to side. They were so efficient that within a few minutes they had discovered an airtight container with MG ammo belts. The sight of the jet black belts filled with brand new ammunition was fantastic. We settled the score a month later. Zbyszek, who was exploring the German positions next to the bunkers, found a locked ammunition box. The steel lacquered cartridges did not have the sightest spot of rust.

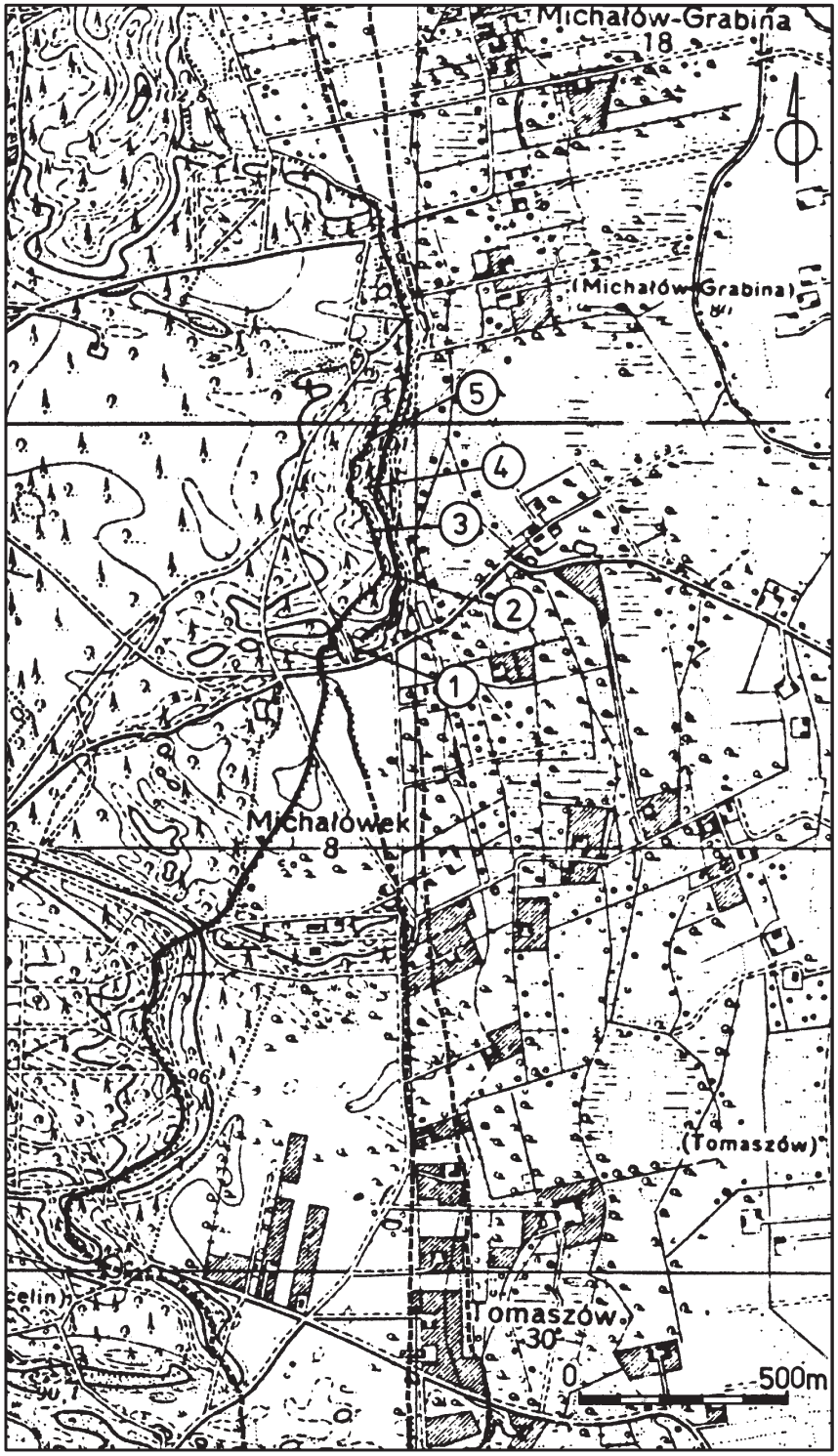
A month later we began checking the approaches to the main trench. A Pak-40 had once been positioned near the MG position where Zbyszek had struck lucky. While previously we had come across only bent shell cases, this time we discovered four airtight boxes with fragmentation shells. The ammunition was in beautiful condition. Had the gun been standing there still we would probably have been unable to stop ourselves from firing it at least once towards the wooden fences on the meadow! The boxes smelled of grease and still had paper labels on the covers — factory new ammunition from July 1944. The next signal via the detector came from a decayed wooden box with three HE shells. Between the bunkers and the 'valley' the Germans had positioned two or three captured Russian 76mm Pak-36r guns directly facing the meadows. Next to the positions, inside wooden cases we found over thirty fragmentation and HE shells of German manufacture. In the 'valley' we found the remains of two SS-men. There was probably also a third but, frankly, what can be left of a man after a direct hit by a 122mm shell? I can authoritatively state, not very much. Shell splinters and shoe-clad feet were embedded in the bottom of the trench. The legs were shorn off in the middle of the calves. The tattered remains of a P-08 told us that it must have been an NCO whose initials were A.R. as evidenced by the letters inscribed on the top of a mess tin.

This 88mm fragmentation shell, together with empty cases and a fired Panzerfaust II warhead were found in an 'Acht komma Acht' position on a hill by the Warsaw-Radzymin road.

Finding rifles was beginning to bore us a little, but now and again you can come across something interesting. In June 1981 I went to Slupno with two young militaria collectors. Going there for pleasure rather than business, I did not 'overwork' myself with digging. We were returning along the 'dike' towards the 'hill'; I was carrying the metal detector casually before me when suddenly, in the middle of a path running alongside a number of Russian foxholes, I got a very strong signal. Under the sand I found a piece of white oxygenated aluminium and glass. My first thought was that it was the optical sight of the gun from which we had found pieces nearby. I was pleasantly surprised when I ended up holding a Mosin 91/30 rifle with a PU sniper's sighting mechanism. The rifle, its magazine having been struck by a bullet, had a round in the breech. The youngsters looked on with envy. Cartridge cases and craters surrounded the foxhole. The sniper (in the Red Army one per company) had probably been killed, and his rifle left where it had fallen from his grasp. How many times had I walked along that path? How many times over the last forty years had hordes of mushroom-pickers and strollers passed over that rifle? . . .

ATTEMPT AGAINST THE SECOND GERMAN LINE, SEPTEMBER 15-20

On September 12, 1944, when the Forty-Seventh Army was on the outskirts of Praga, the VIII Tank Corps was engaged. On the afternoon of the following day it took Marki, cutting the Radzymin road in two. In the evening the Hungarians launched a counter-attack and retook the town after destroying twenty-five Russian tanks. At the same time the Germans blew up all the bridges over the Vistula. To stop the Russian attack along the approaches to the river, the IV. SS-Panzerkorps was reinforced with various units. Of these the biggest was the 19. Panzer-Division, transferred from the Warecko/Magnuszew bridgehead, whose tanks stopped the Russians in the northern part of Praga for the whole of September 14. During that time the Germans were completing new defensive positions along the Zeran and King's Canals to which they withdrew on the 15th. Having thus shortened their defensive line considerably they were able to conduct a more successful defence. During the night of the 15th forty tanks of the VIII Tank Corps penetrated the gap between the 19. Panzer-Division and the 1. Kavallerie-Division. The tanks were surrounded near Marcelin and only seventeen managed to fight their way out. Despite heavy losses, at 3.00 a.m. five Russian divisions began an attack to penetrate the German defences between Tomaszow and Rembelszczyzna, without success. The Russians were forced to use the next twenty-four hours in redeploying their forces, concentrating their artillery and stockpiling the necessary ammunition. On September 18, after a whole day of fighting, the Russians managed to penetrate the German lines and in the evening reached the Michalow Grabina/Hill 103/Bialoleka Dworska/Tomaszow line. During the night the Germans assembled considerable forces — the 19. Panzer-Division, the 3. SS-Panzer-Division, part of the 1. Kavallerie-Division and the remains of the 73. Infanterie-Division, supported by nearly 100 tanks and SP guns — which began to liquidate the penetration in the morning. That same night the Germans took back Bialoleka Dworska and the following morning they recaptured Hill 103 and Hill 96. The Russian counter-attacks gained little ground. The infantry, threatened by a German outflanking movement, abandoned Hill 101 on September 20. The divisions of the Forty-Seventh Army suffered heavy losses. The VIII Tank Corps, after losing more than fifty tanks and SP guns



The battlefield around Bialoleka Dworska, showing the outline of the German trenches, based on a 1934 WIG 1:25,000 map. The annotations, showing the salient features of Hill 101 are as follows; 1: the southern branch. 2: the southern summit. 3: the centre summit. 4: the saddle. 5: the northern summit.

between September 16 and 20, had to be withdrawn to receive new personnel and equipment. This success, which cost the Germans almost fifty tanks, was the result of the superior use of the surrounding terrain. The forests afforded the possibility of conducting a concealed manoeuvre with the reserves, while the hills created chokepoints, canalizing the movement of the Russian tanks, and were good observation points for the artillery, which picked off the enemy at will on the flat meadows around the Brodno Canal. The German artillery fired several thousand 105mm and 149mm shells every day. The commander of the First Byelorussian Front, Marshal K. Rokossowski, saw for himself the results of the German artillery fire when he visited the Forty-Seventh Army units that were involved in the heavy fighting and were unable to eliminate the German defences. The Forty-Seventh and Seventieth Armies were the only Russian forces specifically ordered to conduct offensive operations along the length of the Narew/Vistula front, while the others established defensive positions. During the night of September 20/21 Stalin allowed the two armies to go onto the defensive for a time.

The largest unexploded ordnance discovered — a 30cm Wurfgerät rocket.

Items found in the German field equipment store — tank jack in centre.

General view of a well-preserved trench at Bialoleka Dworska.

It was here, at the bus-stop near Bialoleka Dworska, that I had found the first cartridge cases. The small town had grown towards the end of the 1930s when a suburb of villas was built — a suburb destroyed by tanks in the fighting, when several knocked-out Shermans with US Army markings painted over with the Russian red star stood among the houses. The majority of the Second Tank Army's equipment was provided under American lend-lease. We also found evidence of the part played by the British in equipping the Soviets.

The winter of 1977 was very long. Despite the bad weather we were walking among snow-capped trees. The snowstorm was particularly bothersome at the top of Hill 101. Since the ground was as hard as steel, using the probing wire was pointless. In desperation we decided to blindly dig up a German position, the only one we were able to locate in the pass near the hill. Nothing except a few cartridges and cartridge cases. We were so disillusioned that we came back to Bialoleka Dworska almost two years later — on October 6, 1979 — to try again.

On the outskirts of a wood next to a road leading to Szamocin we discovered many foxholes full of 75mm L48 shell cases and Panzerfaust I shells. Around Hill 101 we found only the remains of mortar bombs and Katyusha rockets. At last, on the northern end of the hill, in one of the foxholes we discovered a circular PPSz magazine and a Mosin rifle cleaning kit. An earth-covered trench runs along the Choszczowka/Michalow Grabina road, very visible over a short distance, and we came across the remains of a German lying in one of the Y-shaped positions. Around the rim of his helmet were some coils and aluminium hooks — the remains of a canvas helmet cover, which in the absence of a belt buckle and identification tags, suggested that he might have belonged to an SS unit. We found a vodka glass, a leather wallet with scraps of a newspaper and a pocket-watch on a silver watch-chain. The lower part of the skeleton was missing and therefore there was no equipment belt. Next to the remains lay a Mauser 98 with a leather strap.

When I became the owner of a metal-detector I decided to try it out immediately on Hill 101. The ground was covered with a thin layer of wet snow. I had hardly turned the detector on when, under a thin layer of soil, I found a bullet-riddled Russian helmet which looked more like a sieve. I covered the whole hill but only found a Russian kettle and anti-tank rifle cartridge cases. I could not believe that there was nothing more to be found there, and so we spent the whole of January scurrying up and down the hill looking for more buried 'treasure'. Braving the cold and snow, our zeal thawed rapidly in the light of the rather poor results. Two more trips in March to the area south and west of Hill 101 disclosed that the few traces of battle were scattered over a wide area. On the

Left: **Boguslaw displays items discovered on the southern side of Hill 101, in positions once occupied by Hungarian soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division. Items include a bullet-holed mess tin, entrenching tools, gas-mask canister and an ammunition box.** *Above:* **Two of the six carrying cases for Russian 45mm fragmentation and armour-piercing shells together with their contents discovered on the northern peak of Hill 101, in a trench running through a young wood on the edge of Bialoleka Dworska, towards Michalow Grabiny.**

western side of Hill 101 we found a 300mm German rocket shell — the largest single item of unexploded ammunition we had ever come across. Nearby we uncovered a small store of German ammunition and field equipment, including a typical German toothed jack which was standard equipment on every German tank.

Obviously the location has a bearing on the way things go. Near Slupno the German positions have survived in very good shape and finding individual foxholes and dug-outs is not difficult. At Choszczowka the contours of the majority of foxholes and trenches are very clear and therefore it is relatively easy to determine how the positions ran across the terrain. At Bialoleka Dworska the situation is totally different, for: (a) some of the positions which ran along meadows no longer exist, (b) in many places the Russian infantry took over the German trenches and positions, modifying them to face the other way, (c) some of the positions were very shallow and so by now are difficult if not impossible to detect, (d) the walls of the trenches were not propped up with boards and therefore quickly disappeared in the sandy terrain, a process often aided by exploding shells, and finally (e) the different topography dictated where the positions were sited and how they were formed.

Encouraged by some finds of Andrew's on the last day of 1980, the very next day I went with one of 'the opposition', Leszek, to Tomaszow, where he once 'dug', and where we trudged about in the slush of falling snow. The most interesting terrain is bisected by the towering wall of the newly-built prison. If any of the guards saw us from one of the watch towers he must surely have thought we were mad. I once read in a newspaper of prisoners having come across an unexploded shell. I in turn could boast of finding a T-Mi-42 and an RPG-40. Leszek found nothing. We moved over to the southern outcrop of Hill 101, where we decided to use only Leszek's GD 1290 Heathkit. We found almost nothing throughout the entire day, and I only mention the fact to stress that you can never be too sure of what — if anything — you are liable to turn up. To make sure that whatever lies buried does not go untraced, it is best to cover the same area a number of times, preferably at different seasons. During that New Year's Day of 1981 we left 'under our feet', so to speak, several dozen items, including five skeletons and one MG.

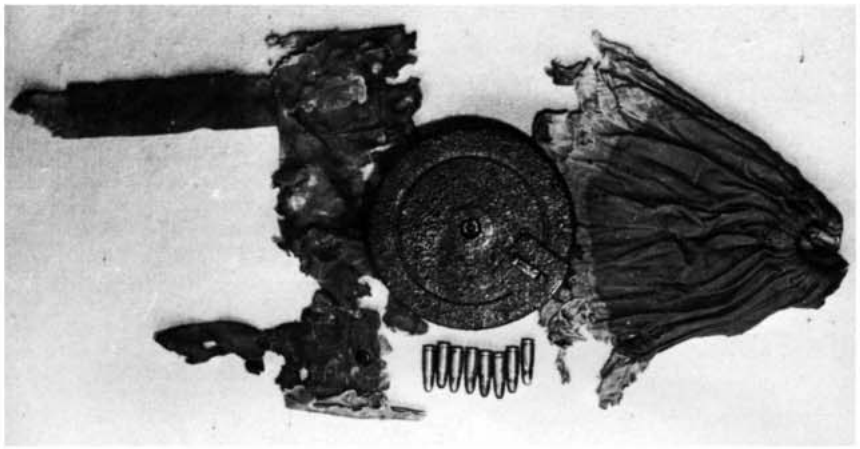
We continued checking the southern part of Hill 101 on January 4, starting by 'working over' a trench which ran in the direction of Hill 96. On the parapet, near the Szamocin road, we found the remains of a dead infantryman's equipment, evidently having belonged to a Hungarian, to judge by his identification tags. We also came across the remains of an SS man lying in the entrance to a dug-out situated on the southern top of the hill. The back of his helmet had been turned into a colander, probably by an exploding mortar bomb. He wore his identification tags on a brass chain. About him, he had an egg grenade and packets of 9mm ammunition.

On February 1, in a trench several metres further on, we came across the first Russian soldier. Close to the spot where we had previously found the German we unearthed two loaded and one empty DP magazines. Three days later we found a fourth one. Next to a dirt road running through the forest towards Bialoleka Dworska, in a concealed PaK-40 position we discovered several shell cases.

In March we explored a trench running through young woods from the edge of Bialoleka Dworska in the direction of Michalow Grabiny. Next to a second road that cut through the trench once stood two or three 45s which fired in the direction of the oncoming German tanks. One of the guns was probably destroyed because we found a sheared-off breech. Nearby more than forty shell cases, most of them hit by shell splinters, were buried. In the trench we found six briefcase type containers which spilled out their contents of fragmentation and AP shells. Next to the 45s once stood a 76mm. A few shell cases and unused shrapnel rounds were all that remained of its presence. Alongside the trench we found Russian mortar positions (probably from the later October fighting); 82mm mortar bombs lay stacked on the parapet. Some bombs had extra explosive charges fastened to them. We frequently came across evidence that we were not the first 'treasure hunters' in the area. Just after the war the battlefield was thoroughly gone over by the returning local inhabitants. After the sappers, the civilians took what they could find: blankets, boxes, telephone cables, sappers' equipment, etc. Children and teenagers took weapons and ammunition which they used up for various firework displays which frequently came to a tragic end. Already in the late 1950s a number of groups of young militaria collectors had begun to explore the area around Praga. By the mid-1960s they had virtually cleaned up the few remnants of the fighting that remained. Thus most of what there was to be seen of the battles for Praga has long since disappeared. Hills 101 and 96 were cleaned up to the last cartridge. Though the signs of the 'digs' conducted fifteen to twenty years ago are all but invisible, we nevertheless identify them without fail.

On the southern slope of Hill 101 we came across the bones of two German infantrymen buried together on the parapet. One of the Germans was in all probability from the 73. Infanterie-Division because we found the decaying remnants of a 'Crimea' shoulder tag

One of the inherent dangers of excavating battlefields is the fact that there are thousands of unexploded mortar bombs, mines, grenades, shells and a host of smaller but still deadly artefacts just waiting to be carelessly tampered with. Here are just a few of the many 82mm Russian mortar rounds discovered, in this particular case, in the positions on Waluszewska Street on the Bialoleka Dworska battlefield. Normally such items were left because of damage by shell-splinters or other defects that rendered them unsafe at the time of the battle — that instability is compounded by years of gradual deterioration in the soil. Boguslaw says that many children in the area who discovered such items in earlier years took them home for firework displays and the like, which often ended with tragic results.



Russian 'myeshok' containing a PPSh-41 sub-machine gun magazine and TT ammunition discovered amongst the remains of two Russian infantrymen killed by shell-fire in a trench on the southern promontory of Hill 101. It is quite common to find the metal fastenings from these little haversacks, together with their contents, but the remains of the bag itself are almost never found.

which was accorded the unit for its participation in the 1942 Crimean campaign. Along with the bones we discovered various items which those who had explored before us had left behind — and fortunately for us there was much they failed to find. In August of 1982 we came across two Russian soldiers literally three metres from the Germans we found previously. In April 1984 several metres further on, in a linking trench running down the slope towards the lower main trench, Andrew came across the remains of two German soldiers together with an MP-44.

On March 31, a beautiful warm sunny day, we were checking the southern culmination. The German trench ran down towards a syncline and continued along the southern spur of the hill. The Russian infantry dug the extension of the trench which ran above the syncline along a parallel spur. Two Russians remained behind for ever. We found the first one in January. The second one had all of his equipment. He was wearing a helmet; on his back he had a myeshok with a pack of TT ammunition and a kettle together with a spoon; on his belt he still had two RG-42 grenades and was wearing boots. His hand was tightly closed around a loaded PPSz with a full magazine. Both men, like several others we found in the positions running along the top of the hill, died in the same way, from head wounds caused by shrapnel as shells burst behind them. It seemed that the Russians despite their hopeless situation, pushed back by tanks and pinned down by artillery fire, tried to hold Hill 101, which was the key position of the German defences, at all costs. At the bottom of the position, among the skeletons we found a forgotten myeshok with a PPSz drum magazine, a packet of TT ammunition and two RG-42s. For us not the contents but the remains of the canvas myeshok possessed the greatest value, since items made of natural fibre cloth almost never survive and finding identifiable fragments is a rarity; the majority of Russian uniforms and personal equipment were made out of canvas and denim: all that is usually left are the buttons and buckles. Most often the only part of the DP magazine pouches to survive are the metal clamping rings with compartments for three magazines. We found many such pouches, frequently with full or empty magazines, on Hill 101.

Between the middle and northern summit of the hill there is a deep valley. It was the only place through which tanks could pass straight through the dune. There were two German positions in the lower trench which together with the trench itself have all but disappeared. The whole area was used by the Russians as a bivouac area towards the end of 1944 by troops getting ready for the January offensive, who created a chain of dug-outs. All that was left in the positions were two helmets, signal flares, fragmentation and rifle flare grenades, a grenade discharger spanner, egg hand-grenades, an MG-42 breech and a belt-loaded drum magazine. In the pass we found the remains of a small destroyed tank, possibly a Stuart, judging by the American 37mm fragmentation shells we found nearby. A British-supplied Matilda or Valentine tank must have been hit on the western side of the southern hilltop — of the many bits and pieces left behind were a number of rating plates in English and 40mm anti-tank shells with the cases broken off. An SU-76 almost managed to reach the northern top after grinding its way over the steep slope before it was hit. The burning SP gun was torn apart by its own exploding ammunition. Various unidentifiable bits and pieces lying about were all that remained of it. All that we could identify were two track links, a track supporting wheel, an ammunition rack and tool case. At the top of the pass there is a small hump on which the Germans prepared an MG post linked to a dug-out by a shallow trench. Despite a thick layer of soil we got a weak but clear signal in the dug-out. It came from a pile of 75mm L48 and L70 shell cases and pipe-shaped containers for 75mm KWK 40 ammunition. Closer to the entrance we found part of an MG-42 cleaning kit and pieces of personal equipment — a bayonet hit by a shell splinter and an M42 helmet with the remains of a Wehrmacht helmet cover still attached, shot clean through in the front. Among the small woods growing on the broad, gently falling western slope of the hill we discovered many positions and trenches filled mainly with shell cases thrown out of a Panther and Panzer IV. There were several dozen shell cases and to this day we still keep finding more. At the beginning of the lower German trench on the southern spur, the spot where I had set out with my new metal-detector for the first time, we located a new position. At the bottom, apart from an M24 stick grenade, we found two closed ammunition boxes. One box contained three full ammo belts, the other a complete cleaning kit: an MG-42 recoil spring, two breeches and belt feed, brushes, oakum and an oil container, several paraffin candles in carton bowls, three orange smoke signal charges, spare belt ends. The airtightness of the box was of no avail in the face of the properties of the German ersatz-grease in which the oakum was soaked. All the metal parts touching the oakum fell apart in our hands. All of the German magazines I have found have had holes and their springs reduced to dust, the grease having turned into a chemically corrosive agent. The German grease is no match for its Russian counterpart.

On January 15, 1983, shaking the wet, clinging snow from our shoes, we explored the hill for the n^{th} time. In the pass we searched around the MG position on the hump. At the entrance to a dug-out, on the parapet of the linking trench we got a faint signal. Andrew began digging and lifted a tuft of grass. From underneath it there appeared a black leather holster with a P-38 and spare magazine. The belt to which it was fastened had a Wehrmacht belt-buckle. An officer or NCO might easily have been wounded or possibly even killed here. The find filled us with joy, since side-weapons rarely turn up on the battlefield. I was still dreaming of finding an MG-42, though. The question was, where should I look for it? The answer was very simple, as we found out a fortnight later when we came back to the dug-out remembering the last find. There is a strange force which compels you to return to the spot where you have found something interesting. The metal-detector signalled the existence of a longish object at the entrance to the dug-out. The earth was heavy, full of roots. Andrew started to feel something with his fingers and stated that it was probably . . . an MG-42. At first I treated his remark as a joke, but, as it became increasingly obvious that he was serious I started to clear away the stuff with my hand. An MG-42 at last! The complete machine gun together with the carrying strap and folded stand was wrapped in a blanket which once shielded it from the sand but, sad to say, had helped it to corrode. We tore the rotting shreds away. Unfortunately the wooden stock had totally fallen apart. We stood the MG in its original position on the hump from which almost forty years ago it had fired towards the Russian infantry until some stray shell killed the machine gunners leaving the dug-out . . .

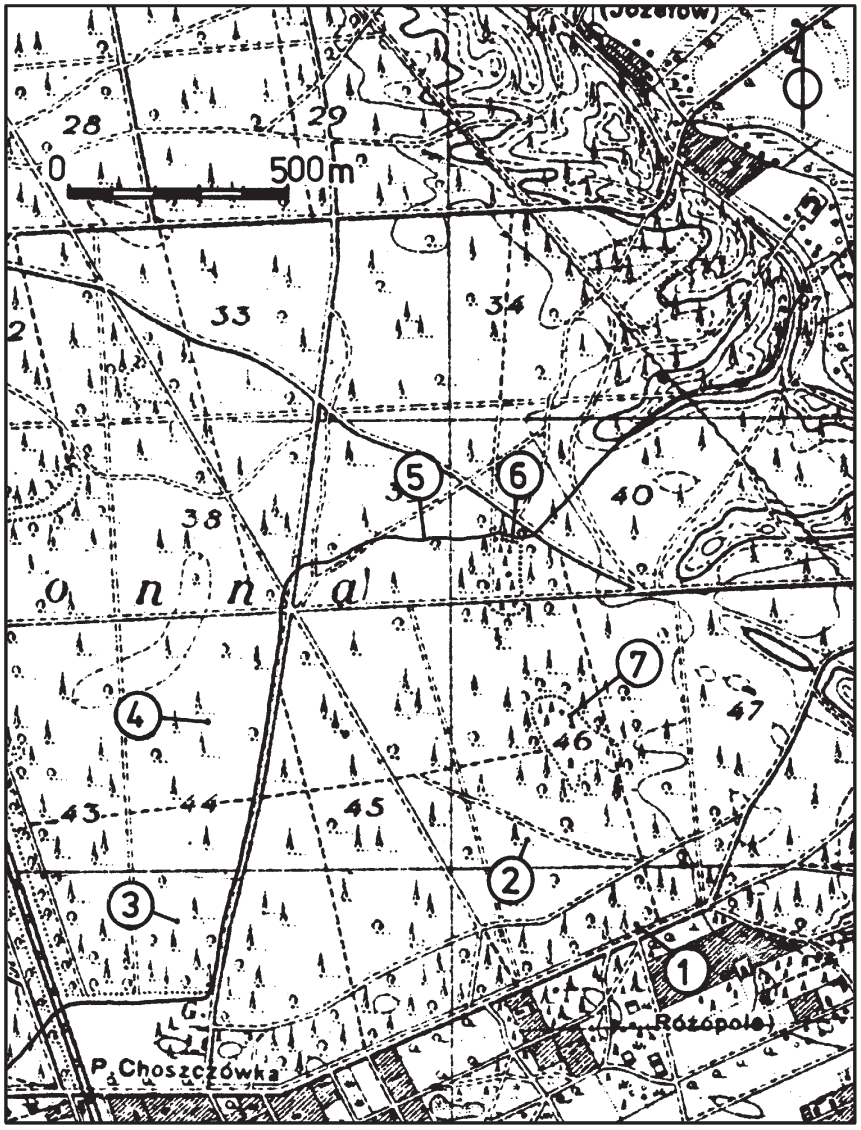
Incredible find from Hill 101 — a German NCO's 9mm Walther P-38 semi-automatic.

All in a day's work! MG-42 (held by Andrew, left) back in position.

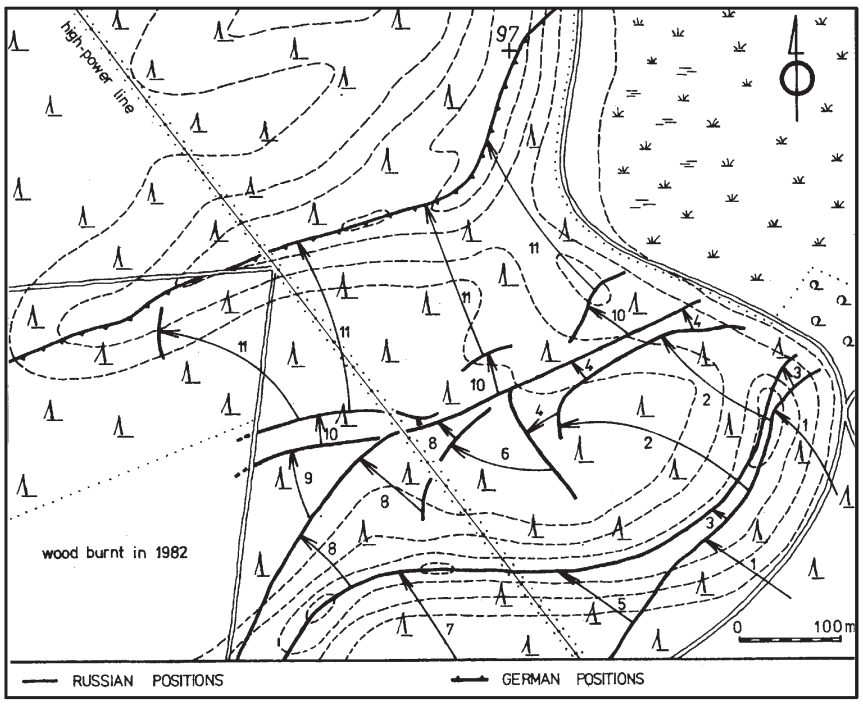
THE BATTLE FOR CHOSZCZOWKA

The Russians resumed their counter-attacks in the direction of the Vistula on October 10, 1944. At first the brunt of carrying them out was borne by the Forty-Seventh Army. Two days later the initiative was handed over to the Seventieth Army, reinforced with the VIII Tank Corps, which broke through the defensive positions of the 5. SS-Panzer-Division south of Nieporet. On October 13 units of the Seventieth Army made a wedge-shaped penetration into the Nieporet Wood after crossing the Legionowo/Zegrze road and railway line in the vicinity of Michalow/Wieliszew railway station. Over the next couple of days the road and railway line changed hands several times. The Forty-Seventh Army reached Marcelin and Rozopole. On October 16 the Germans managed to stop the Russian attack. The Russians continued the attack on October 19 and by the 22nd had managed to force the Germans back to the Zeran/Wisniewo/Rozopole/Jozefow line. Heavy fighting, with many smaller tank battles, took place around Wola Aleksandra and Katy Wegierskie. The 19. Panzer-Division found itself cornered between the Vistula and the Praga/Legionowo railway line. The Russians aimed at cutting the division off by an attack along the Rozopole/Jablonna line. The Germans, who were aware of this, assembled substantial reserves in the Rozopole/Jozefow area and stopped the attacking 60th and 234th Infantry Divisions, which between October 23 and 26 were forced to fight out a violent positional battle.

Walking the line of hills near Michalow Grabina in a north-westerly direction, you can still tell today how the Russian attack got bogged down in the woods. At first, you come upon individual foxholes, further on groups of them; then they begin to form a line; they are joined with linking trenches and you begin to find more cartridge cases; the bomb craters show the increasing calibre of the exploding shells — finally, continuous lines of trenches indicate that this was where the Russian defensive positions began. Rozopole was completely destroyed during the fighting. The rebuilt part of it is now called Choszczowka, the same as the locality



The Choszczowka battlefield with the outline of the final German defensive positions, based on a 1934 WIG 1:25,000 scale map. 1: Battery of 75mm 1IG 18's. 2: Battery of 120mm s.Gr.W. 42's. 3: Battery of 150mm s.F.H. 18's. 4: Battery of 10 150mm I.F.H. 18's 5: Assault gun positions. 6: Flak positions. 7: Clearing.



Boguslaw Perzyk's map of existing positions in the vicinity of Hill 97 near Choszczowka, which illustrates the successive stages of the Russian attack.

on the other side of the railway track. Clumps of bushes and the remains of destroyed houses, often surrounded by foxholes and dug-outs, fence posts scarred by shell splinters, give this particular battlefield an eerie, haunted atmosphere. Young woods cover several square kilometres of the surrounding area. The oldest trees were planted in the early 1950s.

There is a small museum at Zolbice, near Watiz, with a display entitled 'The Forest as a Witness of Battle'. This contains interesting items in the form of tree trunks with bullets, shells and shell splinters lodged in them, plus all manner of objects embedded by the force of exploding shells, which as exhibits bear witness to the heavy fighting that took place in the region. Unfortunately, the creation of such a display made up of trees from around Praga is impossible, for all of the trees that stood here during the war were destroyed 'to the last branch'. At the end of October 1944 the area to the north of Rozopole resembled a desert. It was even impossible to come by trees razed by exploding shells since they were all consumed by fire. These former woods sheltered the German artillery. The

Boguslaw unearths the skull and helmet of a member of the 5. SS-Panzer-Division 'Wiking' in the Nieporet Forest — the helmet still had remnants of its canvas camouflage cover attached. Under Polish law, in theory the police should be informed in every case where human remains are discovered. In practice, however, so many skeletons of war casualties are found and, in circumstances where the cause of death is obvious, notifying the authorities is usually neglected. This is particularly so in cases where German soldiers' remains are concerned — there are not even any official contacts with the German War Graves Commission; as Boguslaw explains: 'Please do not be surprised by this fact — the Germans have left the worst possible impression in the minds of the Poles and no one here places flowers on the graves of Germany's known or unknown soldiers.'

l.I.G.18 battery was positioned at the eastern end of Chlubna Street. Here and there we found more than fifty LIgrZ-23 nA fuses from dismantled artillery shells. The fact that we came across only fragmentation shells seems to suggest that the artillery laid down high-trajectory fire towards the area behind the hills. Shell cases lay all around together with spent igniters. All around us we found the steel bottoms and locks — all that remained from the willow basket-type shell containers.

Several hundred metres to the north-west stood a battery of 12cm s.Gr.W.42s. Apart from individual shells there were masses of both empty and full metal containers for additional charges. On the approach to the positions we unearthed a helmet and a breadbag containing shaving equipment and a Waffen-SS belt-buckle. The positions occupied by the gun crews were lined with bricks, boards, even doors of which only the hinges and locks remained. We discovered a second helmet and full gas mask containers. The positions were richly equipped with civilian paraphernalia — stoves, primus stoves, dishes, cups, small tables, etc. They even had gramophone records. All around were empty food tins. The positions would have been a paradise were it not for the Russian Air Force — right next to them we found several bomb craters made by Russian quarter-ton bombs.

The German 10.5cm l.F.H.18 and 15cm s.F.H.18 batteries were positioned along the railway tracks. We discovered many rusted shell cases and the remains of wooden crates and wooden/metal ammunition yokes. When the front line passed the hills, the Germans moved their artillery to the other side of the Vistula. By coincidence the infantry positions pass through the individual artillery formation positions and constitute a separate area for exploration. The intensity of the fighting in the various sectors of the front line varied considerably. This is to be seen, for example, from the different stages of development of the German positions. The sector between the Vistula and the railway track was the quietest and there was enough time to dig deep trenches and dug-outs, whereas part of the independent positions which begin at a forester's lodge are linked by a Kriechgraben (trench for crawling along), and the continual Russian attacks made the creation of more solid positions impossible. During the night of October 26, 1944, the Germans began to move their front line back, withdrawing to newly-built, heavily mined positions running for twelve kilometres from the northern edge of Jablonna, through Chotomow to Topolina, which they occupied until the January offensive.

When the forest was replanted after the war, the surface was ploughed over to no great depth, while deeper depressions were skirted round. For many years the thick forest grew nicely and it seemed that the battlefield would survive unscathed. Unfortunately, though, this was not to be. In the 1960s a gas pipeline was laid; in 1980 a water pipeline cut through the area, and in 1983 the forest was marred by the erection of an electricity power line. Ensuing fires, the ploughs and bulldozers of the construction crews, destroyed almost half of the battlefield. Add to all this the desolation caused by earlier 'treasure hunters', and it would seem that there would be nothing more to be found here, yet such was the fighting during the course of forty-eight hours in October 1944 that even future generations will go on finding remnants of it.

Andrew accompanied me on my first digging trips to this particular battlefield in the autumn of 1977. On our first visit we made a general exploration of the German positions running alongside the road leading from the forester's lodge to Legionowo. One of the waterlogged shallow recesses in the ground — niches dug by the advancing Russian infantry — was filled with equipment. Andrew busied himself piling up in front of it ammunition, a Russian helmet, hand-grenades, a German gas mask, a Mosin rifle-cleaning brush, a Mauser cleaning kit, German equipment straps, until he suddenly concluded that there was nothing more except . . . human hair. It soon turned out

Zbyszek shows off a 7.92mm Gewehr 43 semi-automatic rifle uncovered on the parapet of a trench in the Nieporet Forest — it had been buried by Russians digging in on top of a dune previously defended by the Germans. Surprisingly, Polish law regarding firearms is more relaxed than here in Britain; a licence being needed for the possession of *operable* firearms and munitions only. Provided the weapons are rendered inoperable, and propellent, explosive and caps removed from munitions, then no licence is required.

An incredible find at Choszczowka was this document found with the remains of a Russian soldier in the valley below Hill 97. It is a certificate of stay in the 583rd Field Hospital and transfer to a reserve regiment, dated 1944. Unfortunately, the name of the soldier is illegible.

A common find in Russian positions — a pack of TT ammunition — note the preservation of the cardboard wrapper. Polish law only regulates the ownership of valuable items such as precious metals or items of great historic value — anything else belongs to the lucky finder.

that it was not hair but the decaying remains of a Russian great-coat. As it transpired, the great-coat was to portend sad discoveries in which the Choszczowka battlefields seemed to abound.

Two weeks later we were exploring the Russian positions almost directly ahead of the niche where we found the great-coat. The German and Russian positions were not more than a hundred metres apart. Standing there, you would have thought that one dash would have been enough to cover that distance. Yes, but it would have been a pretty desperate one. After a few feet the Russian infantry were pinned down in a murderous sea of fire. The Russian squads rarely withdrew; more often they pulled out their entrenching tools and in the time it took to dig for cover they were hidden behind a life-saving embankment of earth. The entrenching tool saved lives more effectively than a rifle or helmet. The old hands took very good care not to be left without one. Shallow, unfinished niches seemed to suggest that men had made it that far before going on, while the full-profile ones could be taken as an indication of the infantry having had time to settle in and defend the few square metres of sand covered with a tangle of burning twigs and branches. (The amazing ability of the Russian infantry to dig itself in, in the worst of ground, dates back to the First World War — for instance, during the siege of Przemysl entire Russian battalions dug themselves in under the surrounding barbed wire during the course of a single night; they were not tackling soft river-deposited sand either, but hard stone-ridden clay. In exploring the various battlefields it seemed to me that the Germans had a strong dislike of digging in, whereas the Russians covered every bit of captured terrain with foxholes.) The contents of the foxholes were almost invariably the same: ammunition and F-1 grenades, RG-42s and RGD-33s. We also found PPSz or PPS magazines, an anti-tank rifle cleaning brush, cups, spoons, mess tins and kettles. We frequently discovered Russian artificial fog-making charges in the shape of small flat bottles filled with carbon tetrachloride and closed with a glass phial containing another chemical substance. Andrew prodded the foxholes with the probing wire while I was busy digging up the things he found. In a shallow niche I uncovered two 'bags' containing twenty anti-tank rifle rounds each. In a well-defined position, not too far down, the spade started to scrape against something round. I picked up a Russian helmet from which a skull fell out. There were still wisps of hair affixed by the rust to the inside of the helmet. The dead soldier was sitting on his heels, his body leaning against the side of the hole. He was still holding an entrenching tool in his hand; on his back he had a myeshok containing a box of Mosin cartridges and an RPG-40; he had an RG-42 hanging on his belt. How he was killed there was no way of knowing. Next to him lay the remains of a machine gunner. He too was still wearing his helmet and he carried a DP magazine in his myeshok.

Nearer the road I unearthed the remains of an infantryman who had been killed while digging in. His hands were clasped around his entrenching tool; there was a kettle among his various personal possessions. What thoughts must have raced through his mind just before he died? He must have known that he stood no chance, lying thirty metres in front of the German foxholes, no more than a grenade's throw from them. A bullet had pierced both his helmet and his skull. Not far away, still closer to the road, was another dead infantryman. Among his various personal possessions was a German identification tag, /5/71 I.R./mot//. He might have taken it from the body of the first German he had killed, near Tula or wherever his unit fought the 29. Panzergrenadier Division (its name in 1943), which took part in the last battle of the September campaign at Kock and later in the war fought on Italian soil near San Pietro *(see After the Battle, Issue No. 18)*. Nearby lay the remains of several other soldiers. More than forty per cent of the 130 human remains we had come across by then were on the Choszczowka battlefield, and hopefully they will soon be exhumed and buried in a Russian war cemetery at Warsaw or a German war cemetery at Modlin. Shellfire accounted for many of them. A severed, bullet-holed head lay on the chest of one of two soldiers buried in a shell hole. This grisly effect was most frequently caused by exploding Nebelwerfer rounds. The German defences were supported by Rocket Mortar Regiment 102 deployed on the other side of the Vistula around Lomianki. The woods around Choszczowka are littered with the batteries' 15cm W.Gr.Spr projectiles. We call them 'flowers' due to the characteristic shape they assume after exploding. I found unexploded projectiles buried in the ground to the tips of their warheads. Anyone who has had to flatten himself against the ground in battle or who has spent a lot of time exploring battlefields will know what shell splinters are capable of doing. Shell splinters lay all over the place. In my collection of items damaged by shell fragments you can find virtually everything: cartridge cases, grenades, magazines, helmets, entrenching tools, water canteens, field glasses, and so on. I have even found

Zbyszek struggles under the weight of a 150mm Wurfgranate 41 Spreng HE missile.

Amazingly well-preserved portion of a Wehrmacht poncho or Zeltbahn, found near the Forester's Lodge at Choszczowka.

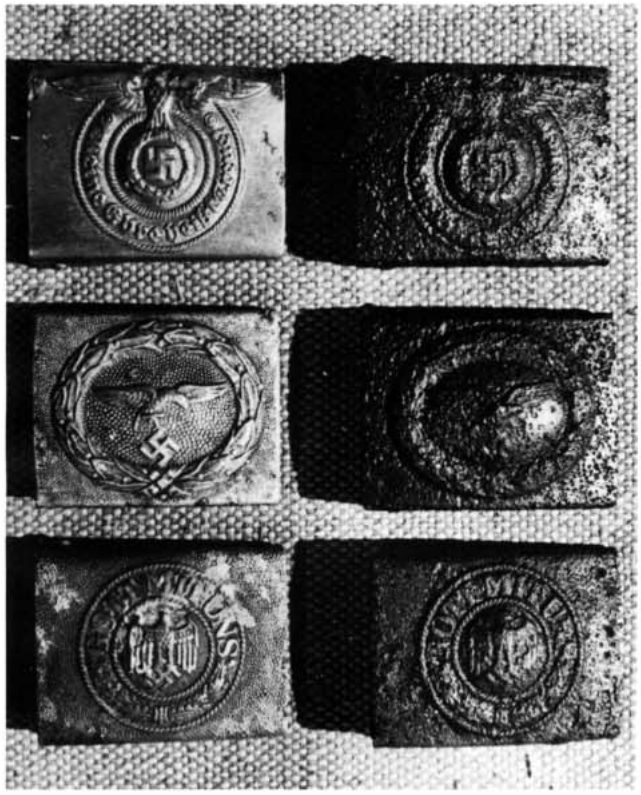
shell-damaged spoons, lighters and pocket-knives. The soldiers must have been really fed up when their canteens and kettles were holed by bullets or shells after they had spent hours engraving them with intricate ornamentation or with their names.

Russian equipment also lay buried in German positions in places where the Russian attacks managed to reach the enemy trenches. In an MG position in front of the forester's lodge I discovered large pieces of a well-preserved Wehrmacht poncho. Almost every niche contained something. A 76mm fragmentation shell had scored a direct hit on one of the MG positions — all that remained were shoe-clad feet torn off above the ankles and splinter-riddled equipment: belt, Mauser pouches, bayonet, a cover containing a complete MG-34 cleaning kit, a spare barrel container, ammunition belts, and a breadbag with personal belongings containing to my surprise a Polish standard-issue watch, probably a souvenir from the 1939 campaign. In front of the positions I discovered a mass of Leuchtpatrone cases and an MP-35 breech. On the embankment of a linking trench I uncovered an empty carrying case for stick grenades, and five Gew.Spr.Gr.30/2 in paper covers. All around you could see the results of the frenzied activity of the Russian Air Force — stabilizers of small bombs, 23mm cannon shells. We found unexploded 2.5kg cluster bombs and even one 50kg bomb.

Where the German line turned towards Hill 97 it ran along the edge of a small forest clearing which was very strongly fortified. West of the clearing two assault guns had been dug in, while three 3.7cm Flak 18 guns had been positioned next to the clearing. Each crew had a separate dug-out next to their gun. Shell cases were strewn everywhere; we found more than a hundred. In the dug-outs, linking trenches and approaches we unearthed thirteen briefcase type containers for fragmentation shells and several larger clips. As usual, almost all of them had been damaged by shell splinters. In the infantry positions we found some 361-LP grenades, Russian and German helmets, G-43 magazines, the remains of a radio transmitter and of ammunition crates, a black synthetic-fibre Feldmütze, German shoes and blankets. The Russians captured the Flak positions but 200 metres further on they were stopped and quickly thrown back. Three Russians lay in one of the connecting trenches and two more nearby. While deepening shell-destroyed trenches the Germans threw everything left by the enemy onto the parapet — hence the three PPSz machine pistols that came to light from among all the various things that were buried.

The scars of war around Praga are gradually being blurred by the construction of growing numbers of summer houses and recreational plots in the forests.

Further on, the German line cut its way through the hills, running along the top of Hill 97, which is a segment of a horseshoe shaped dune. Together with Jurek, who had explored the area twenty years before, I began to go over the positions. The Russians managed to capture the southern segment and force the enemy out of the valley of the 'horseshoe' onto the northern segment (Hill 97), where the Germans dug themselves in, reinforcing their defensive positions with two or three 2cm Flak 38 guns — many shells and a magazine being left behind. The Russian infantry which dug itself in down in the valley had to choose between death in the ghostly



Nice collection of both alloy and steel versions of German belt buckles representative of the SS, Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe units involved in the fighting around Warsaw.

Cause for alarm! A Russian 50kg bomb unearthed.

Remnants of German 3.7cm Flak post include telephone reels.

light of the Leuchtpatrones, in the cauldron of fire put down by the Schnellfeuerkanones, or the capture of Hill 97. They succeeded in taking the hill, but a German counter-attack supported by heavy tanks regained the northern segment of the dune. Despite heavy bombardment and direct fire from the top of the southern segment, the Germans managed to hold out. The fact that we often found thirty or more grenade pins in individual German positions is sufficient evidence of the perseverance of the Russian attacks.

The remains of German troops are not often to be found on the Choszczowka battlefield, for during their unhindered withdrawal during the night of September 26 they were able to take the bodies of their fallen comrades with them. On Hill 97 Jerek once found a dead Russian infantryman, still clutching his PPSz, lying on top of the remains of a dead German, which we were able to tell from the German's identification tags, the sole remaining indication of his having belonged to one of the Luftwaffe field units which were attached to the IV. SS-Panzerkorps from mid-September 1944. When the 73. Infanterie-Division, the 1. Kavallerie-Division and units from the 'Hermann Göring' Parachute Panzer Division, which replaced the Hungarians and the main body of the 19. Panzer-Division, were withdrawn from the area, Luftwaffe field units constituted at least one-third of the battle-worn SS divisions. Helmets, belt-buckles and spoons marked with the Luftwaffe eagle found in Choszczowka are evidence of the presence of these field units, which played a significant rôle in stopping the Russian attacks.

Behind Hill 97 lie fields and meadows, then a second chain of dunes. On November 22, 1980 we decided to explore the subsequent sections of the front. We started at the eastern edge of Choszczowka, where the Russian artillery once stood by the burnt-out houses scattered among the pine trees. Here I had previously located the positions of 120mm mortars. We were looking for mortar bombs in good condition which could be defused. After an hour of searching through the rubble, bits of gutters and smashed roof tiles, we uncovered a stack of eighteen of them. We moved rapidly on, across the fields to Josefow. The whole area is being taken over for the enjoyment of holidaymakers and now sprouts summer houses. A well preserved German trench runs among the hills along the Legionowo/Rembelszczyzna road.

Selection of badges, decorations and shoulder boards of both sides unearthed in the Choszczowska area — such items are not often found; usually they are only recovered with the remains of dead soldiers and even then, not always; for, as in all wars, souvenir hunting was part of the normal pattern of behaviour on both sides. The items are Russian and German o/r's epaulettes; Russian Medal for War Merit; Russian Guards Badge (awarded to units which had gained particular distinction on the Battlefield); Unknown Russian; (bottom centre) German other ranks cap eagle; German Infantry identity disc; German wound badge; German General Assault Badge (awarded for three assault actions on three separate days); German identity disc for a member of an SS Support Unit. Note that the lower half of the disc has been snapped off — consistent with normal procedure upon burying the body. The half pictured here would stay with the body, and the other half would be sent on to higher authority by the soldier's unit. In this case, the body was probably buried by his comrades who then, properly, removed the relevant part of the disc to confirm the soldier's death to their superiors.

In one of the positions we found a suitcase container for carrying stick grenades. Further on lay a German helmet, a DP magazine, 23mm lt. shell cases; then, as the metal-detector gradually began to bleep less and less and finally fell silent, several hundred metres down the trench it emitted a tremendous signal. 'It must be a part of a tank', I thought to myself. The spade quickly became stuck in a layer of rotted Maxim ammo belt links. There must have been masses of them. I was about to stop digging when the spade suddenly hit a massive obstacle. With his hand Andrew uncovered a grip of some kind. It looked like a . . . no, it couldn't be. But it was! We had uncovered a virtually complete Russian PTRS-41 anti-tank rifle. As we were pulling it out of the ground, it scraped against something else beneath. With the spade I exposed a thick pipe and was able to make out the shape of whatever it was. At first we could hardly believe our eyes — it was a mortar barrel. We began to dig like mad and several minutes later we knew that we had found a complete Russian Model 37 82mm mortar. Five minutes later, from alongside the hole, up came an 82mm Model 41 but minus its stand. I thought I was dreaming when moments later I was holding a Maxim machine gun in my hands, together with two armour-shields and spare breech but without the base. It would seem that the troops gathering the weapons left on the battlefield had grown tired of carrying the Maxim and dumped it in the trench and covered it over with soil. It was just our luck that this time we forgot to bring a camera along. We always seem to leave it behind when we find something interesting.

Boguslaw tries out the Russian PTRS-41 anti-tank rifle found in the arms cache in a German trench alongside the Legionowo Rembelszczyzna road, together with a Maxim machine gun and two 82mm mortars!

IN CONCLUSION

Sitting in my room and looking at the old Maxim barrel, I frequently wonder how many soldiers were killed by the weapon. Produced in 1943, it must have mown down many an advancing grenadier. The numerous patches on the cooling system testify to its having taken part in more than one battle before spitting out its final stream of bullets on the outskirts of Praga. On top of the machine gun lies a splinter-crushed Russian helmet with a red star painted on the front. Nothing was left of the soldier who once wore it on his head. Hundreds of young men like him were covered up for ever by the sandy soil around Warsaw. Others left behind their friends, or parts of themselves. They dug foxholes not knowing they were digging their graves. In fighting to drive back the Germans, they fought to overcome their own fear — a personal battle common to both sides.

These are the sort of thoughts that artefacts recovered from the field of battle tend to evoke — and for me they constitute a perpetual and salutary reminder of what such objects represent.

AN EPIC EXCAVATION

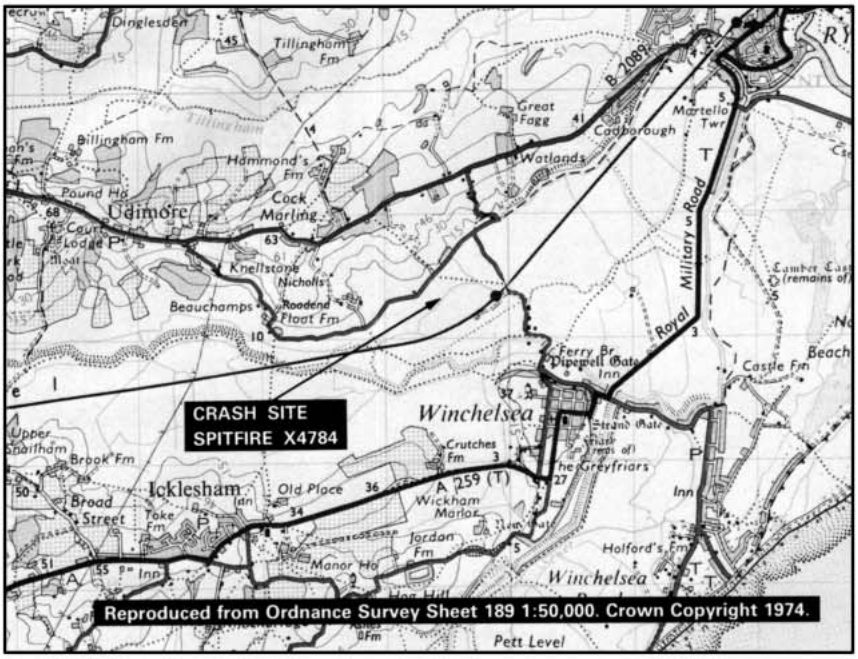
PILOT OFFICER CHARLES BARBER

Shortly before one o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, April 24, 1942, nine-year-old James Cleeland was walking with his parents up towards the town gates of the ancient town of Winchelsea in Sussex. Young James, a keen aircraft spotter, detected the sound of a Spitfire flying overhead, but its extreme altitude precluded a visual confirmation of his identification. Three quarters of a mile away across the Brede Valley, farmer's son, Robert Mair, was having his lunch in a barn at Roadend Farm, Udimore. He too heard the Spitfire, but took little notice; the sight and sound of aircraft had, by now, become almost a monotonous routine event and it was an unusual day that saw no Spitfires overhead!

Suddenly, however, James Cleeland and Robert Mair took a keener interest in the lone Spitfire as its engine note increased in pitch, getting louder and louder as it entered a roaring all-out dive. In the first few seconds the engine seemed to falter and splutter a few times before finally picking up and gathering a fearsome momentum. The sound of the screaming Merlin, no doubt well exceeding its operational limitations, was a terrifying noise for those on the ground below who waited apprehensively for the climax to what was obviously a terminal dive. Many people in Winchelsea and nearby Rye, fearing an awful catastrophe, hurriedly took cover, but young Robert Mair, oblivious to any danger, rushed from the barn to see what was the cause of all the noise. Searching skywards he saw nothing, but only as there was a horrifying thud were his eyes drawn towards one of the fields in the valley below the farm. The silence after the horrendous din of the tortured Merlin was almost awesome; the terrible scream having stopped abruptly with the sickening crunch of the crash. Across the fields Robert could see a huge column of water, smoke and steam plume skywards in a gigantic column rising from one of the drainage ditches which criss-cross the river valley. Unlike young Robert, James Cleeland had seen the aircraft in its dive, having finally caught sight of it as it neared the ground in a flat-out vertical dive, the sun glinting from its cockpit perspex and light coloured paintwork whilst it fell. A short while after it had impacted, a fine spray fell gently across the western outskirts of Winchelsea; water caught and blown by the wind from the plume thrown up by the impact. To young James those terrifying and momentous few seconds left a lasting and vivid impression; the sight, the sound, and then the feeling of the mist of water falling across James and his parents almost half a mile away was a memory which never left him. In 1986 he said that it was something which he still thought of frequently, yet he was not the only person whose thoughts had often turned to the events of that day.

Earlier that day, Spitfire X4784 of No. 140 Squadron had taken off from RAF Benson,

Top: **Members of No. 140 Squadron at RAF Benson, seen here in more leisurely days in 1942 with one of their Spitfire PR IV aircraft. Charles Barber is in the back row, second from left.** *Above:* **Spitfire X4784 in 1942 prior to the fatal crash later in April that same year.**



Oxfordshire, to conduct a high altitude photographic sortie of the French coastline between Calais and Boulogne, X4784 being a Spitfire PR IV photo-reconnaissance variant of the Mark V fighter. Basically, the airframe was an uprated Mk II, but fitted with a Merlin 65 and having its armament stripped and extra 66-gallon tanks fitted in the wing leading edges. Under the wing was mounted an F.8 camera, whilst a double bank of F.24 cameras were housed in the fuselage behind the pilot's seat armour. Almost incongruously, this particular aircraft was painted overall a delicate shade of pink, an unlikely choice of colour for this sleek warplane! Pink, however, had been found to be useful camouflage colour for use on high altitude work or against a cloud background, though its effectiveness at a low altitude or against a landscape background was not so obvious! Seated at the controls of this rather pretty Spitfire was a young Yorkshireman, 22-year-old Pilot Officer Charles Bertram Barber, and whilst missions to Calais by PR Spitfire pilots were considered to be 'run of the mill' and relatively safe, on that Friday Barber was destined not to return.

Exactly what happened to Charles Barber will never be known for sure, but the most likely explanation is that he was the victim of a malfunction of his oxygen equipment, a common enough cause for the loss of RAF aircraft during the 1939-45 war. Barber's operating height would have certainly required oxygen and any interruption or starvation of supply would have had dire and almost immediate effects. Presupposing he had time to realise what the problem was, he could well have been too weak or uncoordinated to even open the canopy for baling out, and considerable effort may have been needed to push the stick forward for a deliberate dive to the less rarefied lower air. What probably happened is that he passed out and slumped forward over the stick, pushing X4784 into an all-out vertical dive. Had Pilot Officer Barber regained consciousness at a lower altitude, it is quite possible that he would have been completely unable to pull X4784 out of its dive, but more than likely he would have remained unconscious throughout its headlong plunge.

The anoxia theory is not borne out by the Air Ministry Form 78 for X4784 (the aircraft record card), which shows the cause of loss as a 'Flying Battle Occurrence'. However, this is not substantiated by surviving German records which do not show any Luftwaffe combats or claims which could account for the loss of Pilot Officer Barber, nor do witnesses on the ground speak of hearing machine gun or cannon fire. It is, of course, just possible that Barber was hit by flak over the French coast and was returning home wounded when he finally passed out. The most likely explanation for the Flying Battle Occurrence entry on the record card is that in view of the operational nature of X4784's last flight, it was automatically assumed that the cause of loss was through battle. Its impact with the ground, and the depth at which the wreckage was embedded, prevented any examination of the aeroplane or its pilot to establish the exact cause.

The point where the aircraft had come down was on the south bank of New House Petty Sewer, Dumb Woman's Lane, about 800 yards west of Winchelsea Station. Although close to the town the crash was actually in the Parish of Udimore, and Police Constables from both Winchelsea and Udimore attended the incident, although it was left to Police Inspector Thomas Amos of Rye police station in the Battle Division to file the official Crashed Aircraft Report. This document times the crash at 1255 hours but Inspector Amos could only speculate as to the type of aeroplane involved, stating: 'Believed Spitfire Fighter'.

DIV. REF. C/17/42 H.Q. REF. RAF. 115/5/42

CRASHED AIRCRAFT REPORT

Parish Udimore Date 24 April. 1942 Time 12.55 hrs.

Exact Location On bank of dyke in marsh land 800 yards west of Winchelsea Railway Station.

Map Reference 330.368

British, Allied or Enemy British Type Believed Spitfire Fighter.

Condition of Machine Totally wrecked and buried.

CREW

Killed Seriously injured Slightly injured Unhurt

Not traced 1 (presumed)

Disposal of crew Pilot apparently buried in wreckage. Awaiting arrival of R.A.F. Crash Party.

Which R.A.F Station notified Hawkinge

Time and Date of notification 13.50 hrs

I. P.—29453

The police Crashed Aircraft Report filed by Inspector Thomas Amos — note that even the type of aircraft was not known for sure, let alone the fate of the pilot, due to the violence of the crash, which left little more than the undercarriage legs, sheared off on impact, behind on the surface.

Detail of Occurrence

A British aircraft, believed to be a Spitfire Fighter, was seen to crash from a fairly great height, at a fast speed, into to ground. The aircraft was completly buried. Efforts were made to remove part of the earth, but the water from the adjoining dyke prevented any succesful result. No crew were seen to bale out of the machine.

Military, Fire Service and Civil Police attended. Military Guard provided by 16 Bn. D.L.I.

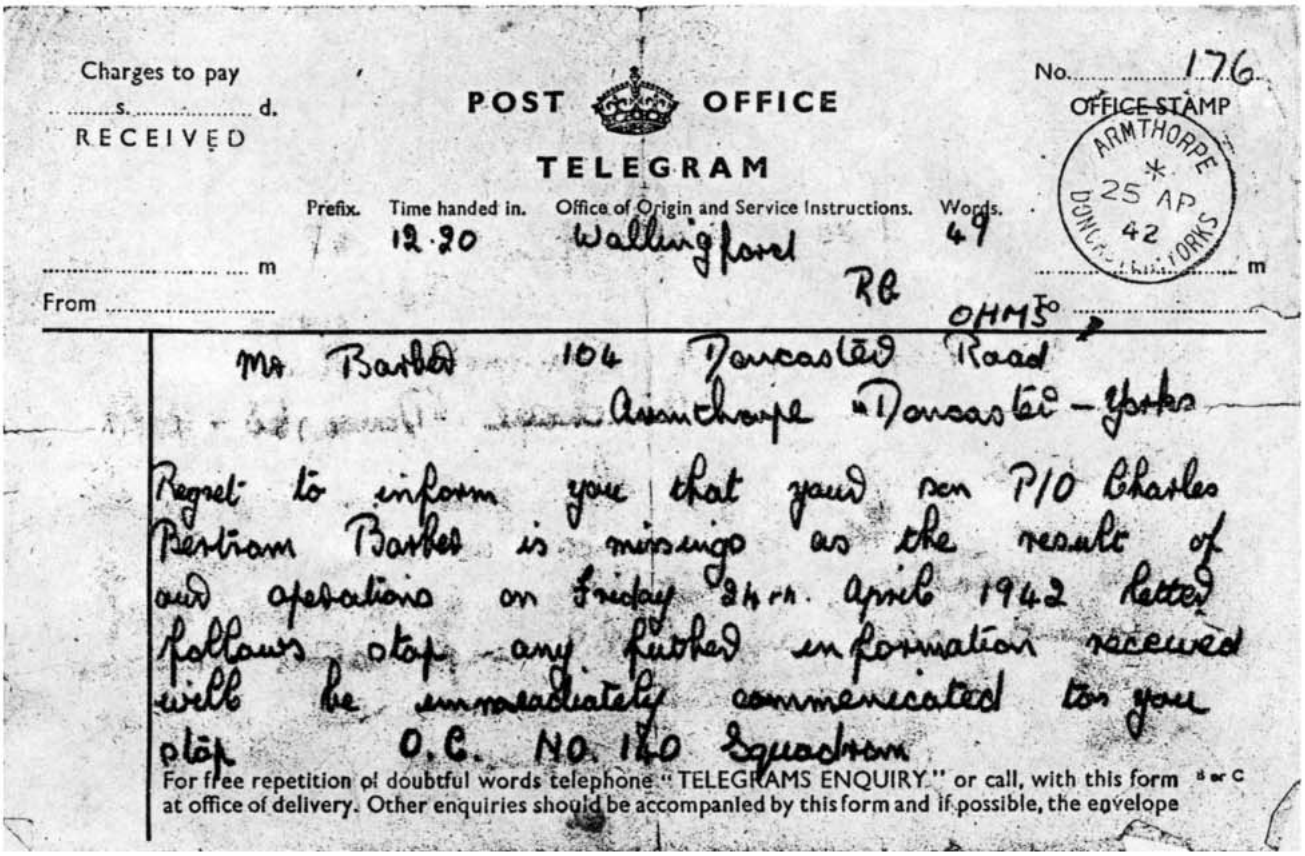
All services, excepting military guard, withdrew at 15.30 hrs.

CHIEF CONSTABLE'S OFFICE E.D.B. 23 APR 1942 LEWES

EAST SUSSEX CONSTABULARY 23APR1942 BATTLE DIVISION

Time and Date information received by Police 1300 hrs. 24 April. 1942.

Signature Thomas Amos. Insp



Charges to pay
.....s.....d.
RECEIVED

POST OFFICE

TELEGRAM

No. 176

OFFICE STAMP
ARMTHORPE
25 AP
42
DONCASTER WORKS

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.
12.20 Wallingford RB 49

.....m .....m

From .....

OHMS To .....

Mr Barber 104 Doncaster Road
Armthorpe Doncaster - Yorks

Regret to inform you that your son P/O Charles Bertram Barber is missing as the result of our operations on Friday 24th April 1942 letter follows stop any further information received will be immediately communicated to you stop O.C. No. 140 Squadron

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form and if possible, the envelope

Squadron Leader Mesurier's somewhat bland telegram informing George Barber that his son had been posted missing.

A few hundred yards to the south-west, a River Authority drag-line dredger was at work clearing ditches when the Spitfire crashed and, under the direction of the Police, and the 16th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, who were on the scene, the shaken drag-line operator was ordered to track his machine across to the crash site and commence an attempt to uncover the wreckage and pilot's body. The work was hopeless. The point of impact had clearly been on the bank of the 20-foot-wide ditch, rather than in the water itself and although digging operations were carried out down to a depth of some twelve to fifteen feet, the excavation flooded and no wreckage was uncovered.

Young James Cleeland had by now managed to make his way to the crash site but all he could see were piles of mud with no trace of the aeroplane that had been. Robert Mair, however, remembers a few shreds of evidence lying on the river bank, the most substantial being the two main undercarriage assemblies. At 3.30 p.m. that afternoon the work was halted, the site being left under guard by the Durhams. Later, a team from No. 49 Maintenance Unit, RAF Faygate, arrived to inspect the site but they too realised the task was beyond them and collected the few remaining pieces of surface wreckage and departed. Amongst the items collected were the remains of at least one of the wing-mounted F.8 cameras; evidence enough to link the disappearance of Pilot Officer Barber with this crash.

It was some while, however, before the authorities were able to establish that this particular crash was X4784, and on the afternoon of Saturday, April 25, the CO of No. 140 Squadron, Squadron Leader Mesurier, was only able to tell Mr Barber by way of a telegram that his son was missing. At this time no other details were available. In a follow-up letter to Mr and Mrs Barber the next day, Mesurier still had no further details as to Charles Barber's fate, and even held out hope that he might be a prisoner-of-war. This sentiment was echoed by the Air Ministry who, in a letter dated April 30, stressed that he was only missing as a result of air operations and that this did not necessarily mean that he was killed or wounded. For some odd reason it took the Air Ministry a further five months to confirm to the anxious Barber family that Charles's aeroplane had been found in a tributary of the River Brede at Udimore, near Rye, Sussex, although this must have been deduced shortly after the crash. Furthermore, the letter went on to tell the distraught parents that their son's body had not been recovered owing to the great depth at which the aircraft was embedded. Just to prolong the agony, the letter informed them that six months would have to elapse before death be presumed.

Unwilling to accept that the recovery of his son's body was impracticable, Mr Barber questioned the Air Ministry's decision not to proceed with a salvage operation. As soon as the six month period stipulated by the Air Ministry had elapsed, Mr Barber took up the case with his Member of Parliament, The Right Hon. T. Williams, Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, urging that something should be done to recover Charles's body. Taking up the matter on his behalf, Williams wrote to the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Air, Captain Harold Balfour, receiving a reply on November 26, 1942, which held out no hope of any action being taken. It read as follows:

I write in reply to your letter to me of the 24th November, with which you enclosed one from a constituent of yours, Mr D. G. Barber of 104, Doncaster Road, Armthorpe, Doncaster, whose son, Pilot Officer Charles Bertram Barber, unfortunately lost his life as the result of air operations.

I have made enquiries with regard to Mr Barber's request that some action should be taken to recover his son's aircraft, which has been found buried in a tributary of the River Brede at Udimore, near Rye, Sussex. I am, however, satisfied that the salvage of this aircraft is impracticable, sorry as I am to have to say this. To attempt to do this salvage work would mean the damming of the river, and there are other difficulties to be considered.

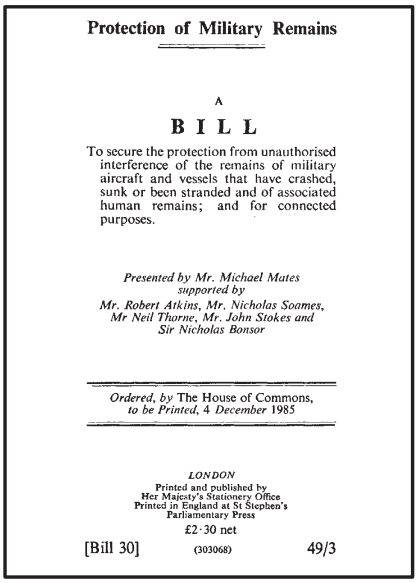
I am sorry that I am unable to meet Mr Barber's request, and I do hope that he will appreciate the reasons for this. When you are writing to him I should be grateful if you would convey an expression of my sincere sympathy with him in the great loss he has sustained, and my regret that I am unable to help him in the way that he wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Harold Balfour

As events have since proved, the Air Ministry's view in 1942 that the recovery was not possible was probably a fair assessment, given the ground conditions on site and the machinery (or lack of it) which was available at the time. The Barber family's rationale for pursuing a request to make a salvage attempt was simply that they could not believe that the Air Ministry could say this work was impossible when, aside from one half-hearted attempt minutes after the crash, no other efforts had been made to ascertain that the task was indeed 'impracticable'. Once the winter of 1942-43 was over Mr Barber again embarked on his campaign to have his son's body recovered and decently buried.

In February 1943, the Air Ministry, responding to a request from Mr Barber, took the unusual step of sending the family an Ordnance Survey Map of the Hastings area on which they had ringed around in red and marked the exact crash location. Wearing his Home Guard officer's uniform, Mr Barber made a lonely pilgrimage by means of train, bus and taxi to visit the spot where his son had died, meeting up with the farmer, Mr Mair, Snr, and others who had first hand knowledge of the crash. Although saddened



Protection of Military Remains

A

BILL

To secure the protection from unauthorised interference of the remains of military aircraft and vessels that have crashed, sunk or been stranded and of associated human remains; and for connected purposes.

Presented by Mr. Michael Mates supported by Mr. Robert Atkins, Mr. Nicholas Soames, Mr Neil Thorne, Mr. John Stokes and Sir Nicholas Bonsor

Ordered, by The House of Commons, *to be Printed, 4 December* 1985

LONDON
Printed and published by
Her Majesty's Stationery Office
Printed in England at St Stephen's
Parliamentary Press
£2·30 net
[Bill 30] (303068) 49/3

The long-running controversy between the aircraft archaeologists of Great Britain and the Ministry of Defence finally came to a head in September 1986, with the introduction of the 'Protection of Military Remains' Bill, presented by Michael Mates (MP for Hampshire East), which became law on September 9. On the one hand, there is the school of thought which says that more effort should have been made, either at the time or, if the demands of war denied facilities, then in the immediate post-war period, to recover the remains of missing airmen shot down over the United Kingdom. Strenuous efforts were made on the Continent by the Missing Research and Enquiry Service to do just this, but not on British soil. The opposing view is that it is now better not to open old wounds, and that things are best left as they are. However, in the case of Charles Barber, right from the beginning, since his death in 1942, his family wanted his remains to be recovered so that they could be accorded proper and decent burial, befitting one of our fallen airmen.

by his journey, Mr Barber had satisfied himself that he had seen the spot but, nevertheless, still refused to accept that a recovery was impossible. For the time being, however, no further requests to carry out a salvage operation were made.

With the end of the war in Europe, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission were charged with the erection of memorials to airmen of the British Commonwealth and Empire who had no known grave. The memorial covering those who had lost their lives in the United Kingdom and within Europe was located above the Thames at Runnymede and bore 20,547 names; amongst them, on Panel 68, that of Pilot Officer Barber. In the register of names he is shown as: 'BARBER, Pilot Offr. Charles Bertram, 47734. R.A.F. (V.R.) 140 Sqdn 24th April, 1942. Age 22. Son of D. George Barber and Edith Barber of Armthorpe, Yorkshire'. On October 17, 1953, HM Queen Elizabeth II unveiled the memorial in a dedication ceremony attended by many relatives of those commemorated. The still grieving parents of Charles Barber were not among them. Instead they held a small memorial service on the site of the crash, officiated by the Rector of Udimore. Both were still unable to accept that Charles could not be properly buried, and the line taken by Mr Barber in 1942 was followed right up until the deaths of both parents in the 1970s.

Charles came from a family of four, having two sisters, Molly and Dorothy, and a brother, Raymond. A native of Yorkshire, Charles was brought up in the Doncaster area and lived in the family home at Armthorpe, attending nearby Thorne Grammar School. In 1935 he expressed an interest to join the expanding Royal Air Force as a boy Aircraft Apprentice, and on November 5, 1935, sat the qualifying examination for entrance. Having passed his examination, in 1936 he joined up to commence his training at RAF Halton. At the outbreak of war in 1939, having completed his three years' trade apprenticeship, he applied for aircrew training and was accepted as an officer candidate for pilot training, being sent to No. 21 Elementary Flying Training School, RAF Booker. From here he graduated to the Flying Training School at Hullavington.

Unfortunately, his training took a setback when he suffered an accident resulting in a broken leg, but he made a speedy recovery to eventually earn his wings during the early months of 1941 whilst still at Hullavington. Writing home from here, he excitedly told his parents of the great thrill he had had when flying a Hurricane for the very first time. However, for the time being at least, the excitement of flying fast single-engined fighters was denied him. His eagerness to fly fighters caused him to persist in his efforts to get a transfer to a unit flying Spitfires or Hurricanes, and his persistence was to pay off. By March 1942 he had managed to get a posting to No. 140 Squadron, RAF Army Co-operation Command, based at Benson, Oxfordshire. On arrival, however, he was dismayed to find not all of the aircraft he would be flying were Spitfires! Indeed, the unit was a photo-reconnaissance squadron and also operated Blenheims on PR missions. These were, in the main, used for night operations; the bomb bays being fitted with cameras and racks for photo-flash flares. Daytime PR work, however, was done by Spitfire and in this role Charles Barber was in his element.

On the morning of Friday, April 24, 1942, Charles Barber was detailed for a flight to the Pas de Calais area and took off from Benson in Spitfire X4784 at 1030 hours with full fuel tanks and cameras loaded and set. From here on nothing further is known of Barber's last mission, but in view of the duration of the flight up until the crash near Winchelsea, it must be concluded that he had flown his sortie over France and was on his return leg. What happened after X4784 had been lost to the sight of ground crews at Benson up until it vanished into the ground before an astonished James Cleeland will doubtless remain a mystery.

Interest in aviation archaeology in the south-east corner of England has, for many years, been rife and it was to be expected therefore that requests to excavate the crash site would have been made to the landowner, now Mr Robert Mair, who as a young man had been at Rodend Farm when the aircraft crashed. In the 1970s, the Brenzett Aeronautical Museum approached Mr Mair but were turned down flat on the reasonable grounds that the wishes of the next of kin were unknown to both Brenzett and the landowner and, furthermore, the task of recovery was judged to be very difficult if not wellnigh impossible. There the matter rested until Pat Burgess and Andy Saunders embarked on a mammoth task working towards the publication of their account of the air war over Sussex; a subject which they had been researching in depth for fifteen years.

In order to provide more background detail to many of the 2,600 wartime air crashes logged, they set about adding more personal and human stories to the stark facts and figures. This involved, in many cases, the tracking down of RAF, USAAF, and Luftwaffe aircrews who had survived and gathering details and photographs of the many who had not. Thus it was that Pilot Officer Barber became a 'target' for their researches, he being the only clearly identified missing RAF pilot on land in the county. Whilst they had known the identity of the Winchelsea Spitfire and its unfortunate pilot since 1970, it was not until November 1985 that contact with the Barber family was established.

In view of the fact that Barber had no marked grave it was felt that it would be an

Raymond Barber pays his first ever visit to his brother's crash site in the company of Robert Mair (left), the landowner, on February 6, 1986.

The job of constructing the dams in readiness for the recovery on the following morning, Saturday August 30, 1986, underway on Friday. *Left:* **The steel piling for the main dam being driven in by the Poclain excavator under the supervision of Andy Cresswell (in digger bucket)** *Right:* **Dick Walker (in water) and Andy Cresswell covering the piling with polythene for added watertightness. Earth was piled against the other side for extra strength.**

appropriate gesture to have a memorial erected on or near the crash site, and this was a scheme to which Mr Mair gave an enthusiastic response. Along these lines, an appeal was therefore placed in the *Doncaster Star* of November 27, 1985, asking for members of the Barber family to come forward. The response was immediate. His brother Raymond and sister Dorothy, together with various cousins, immediately got in touch. Charles Barber's next of kin was now his brother, Raymond and, whilst he welcomed the interest and the plans for a memorial, he revealed the amazing saga dating back to 1942, since when the family had persevered with their efforts to have the body recovered. As recently as October 18, 1968, the then-Minister for Defence, Merlyn Rees, had written to Raymond re-stating the previous official view that a recovery was impossible. Whilst the 1942 decision could, no doubt, be vindicated, the 1968 decision must be called into question given the availability of more sophisticated equipment and more freely available manpower. According to Merlyn Rees, there was little hope of finding more facts and, whilst the possibility of salvaging the buried part of the machine had been considered, he said that this was impracticable and the aircraft remained struck off as a total loss. This letter, said Raymond Barber, '. . . destroyed the last remaining flicker of hope that we as a family had to lay our Bertie to rest, properly, back home'.

On February 6, 1986, Raymond Barber travelled down from his Yorkshire home to visit the crash site. During the war he had not had the opportunity to do so as he was himself in the Forces, serving in the Near East, and had also been unable to attend the post-war memorial service. His visit, therefore, was an emotional one. As he surveyed the snow-covered crash site and the wooden timbering put on the bank to stabilise the soil after the crash, he satisfied himself that he would continue his efforts to have his brother recovered. As he walked away from the scene with Robert Mair he whispered quietly: 'Cheerio Bertie, we'll try not to leave you there for much longer.'

Robert Mair, whilst not relishing the thought of the mess and disturbance to his field and river bank which an excavation of the spot would bring, readily acceded to Raymond's request for an attempt to be made and, consequently, this was accepted as a project under the auspices of the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum. Without any further delay a site meeting was held with the Southern Water Authority's River Board Engineer on February 11, 1986, who agreed to the excavation proceeding, although this would mean damming the river and pumping it dry before the virtual destruction of the river bank and bed. Without doubt the operation would be of epic proportions and cost, with no guarantee of a successful outcome.

Coincidentally, the contact which was made with the Barber family came at a time when Michael Mates (Conservative Member of Parliament for Hampshire East) proposed his Private Member's 'Protection of Military Remains' Bill. This Bill, if it became an Act of Parliament, would make it an offence to interfere with the wrecks of military aircraft or sunken military ships unless a licence for the work had been granted by the Ministry of Defence. Introduced on December 4, 1985, the Bill became law on September 9, 1986, having passed through all stages of Parliament and been given Royal Assent on July 9. In the light of the long-running controversy over the recovery of wartime airmen by private individuals or organisations in the United Kingdom in recent years, the legislation was intended to give the Government tight control over all crash sites and thus prevent problems arising in future over the discovery of human remains or bombs. In such cases where finds of this nature were suspected, a licence would not normally be granted.

Whilst the recovery team working on the Barber project had no wish to fly in the face of published Parliamentary proposals, it was clearly an option to go ahead immediately with the recovery plan — given that both the family and the landowner wished the excavation to proceed. At this time there was no *legal* requirement in force which required recovery groups to seek permission from the Ministry of Defence for recovery operations, although the Ministry's 'Notes of Guidance' stated that permission should be sought. Given the circumstances prevailing at the time, therefore, the recovery team wrote to the Minister for Defence seeking the official view of a situation where a particular aircraft crash site could be positively identified, where the pilot was still missing and where the next of kin wanted recovery to take place. The response from Michael Berkeley, Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister, was set out in a letter dated March 18, 1986, in which it was stated that, in such cases, 'Licences would *not* unreasonably be refused'. Heartened by this positive response, the team therefore elected to formally apply for permission to recover Pilot Officer Barber's aeroplane in a letter to the Ministry of Defence on March 23.

On April 11, having satisfied themselves that the site under question was indeed the wreck of X4784, the Ministry wrote to

The downstream dam, by the bridge culvert (centre) with the pumps in operation. Each one was capable of moving an impressive 12,000 gallons per hour. The building in the background is Winchelsea railway station.

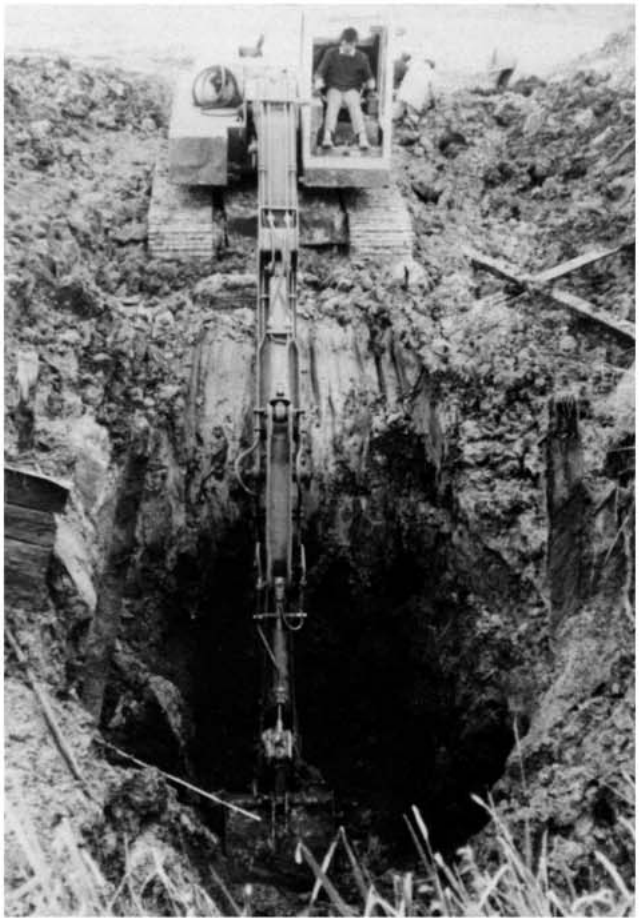
Charles Barber's next of kin, Raymond, asking for confirmation that he wished approval for the recovery to be given to the Tangmere Aviation Museum and for proof of his relationship to Pilot Officer Barber. Whilst satisfactory answers were speedily provided to these questions, the matter thereafter appeared to get bogged down in red tape and Ministerial bureaucracy, there being no further response aside from numerous telephone conversations until a letter was received from the Ministry to the recovery team dated July 24. This stated that consultations relating to the case had taken longer than anticipated, but that a firm decision was expected in 'the not too distant future'. However, the Ministry's representative had verbally informed the recovery group on July 1 that a decision was expected 'within the next few days'. Unfortunately, this was not forthcoming.

By August 4 nothing further had been heard by either the recovery team or Raymond Barber, who was now becoming most anxious for an early decision and therefore wrote to the Ministry's Department S10 (Air) requesting early action. This was followed by a letter from the Tangmere Museum on August 20 urging that the matter be concluded without any further delay. It was pointed out to the Ministry that time was running out from the point of view of organising a recovery to fit in with the farmer's calendar; furthermore, time was also running out if the excavation were to be completed inside the law, with the effective date of legislation — September 9 — looming near.

By August 28 no approval had been received and, after much deliberation, the Museum's team decided to go ahead with the recovery, putting the necessary wheels in motion for an attempt to be made over August 29-31. The Museum stated that it was with regret that a decision to move on the recovery in the absence of official approval had had to be made, but that the team felt that they were morally obliged to do so, for if they had waited until after September 9, and the Ministry of Defence had then refused a licence, the wishes of the family would never have been carried out unless in direct contravention of the law.

Preparing the ramp down to the anticipated excavation site, watched by Robert Mair (right). The orientation of the wreckage was proven by the discovery of the machine gun blast tubes — one from each wing. One was found in the river and one just in front of where Mr Mair is standing. They proved that the epicentre of the wreckage was on the bank itself.

In view of the location of the crash site it was anticipated that immense difficulties would be encountered during the operation; the biggest problem being with water. The River Authority, most helpful throughout the project, confirmed that they were able to control water levels to a limited degree and that in all probability it would be possible to isolate the stretch of water involved, and for the pumps at the downstream pumping station to all but empty the river of its water.

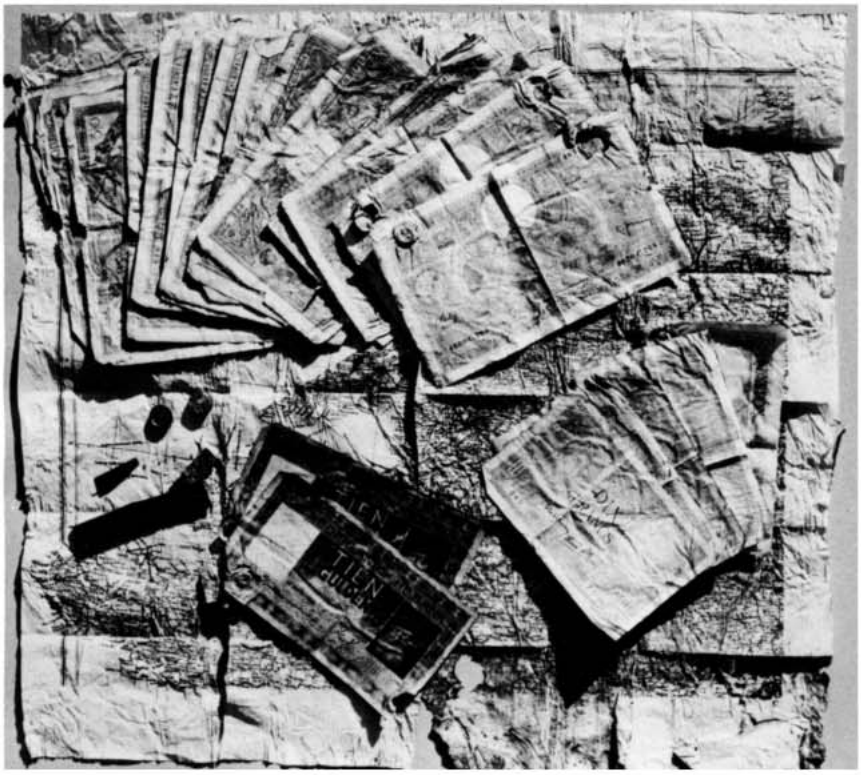


Once the river bed itself had been turned over to ensure that no wreckage lay here *(left)* **the Poclain digger moved backwards onto the site itself.** *Right:* **At this depth the main wreckage began to come to light after forty-four years. Note the original timber shoring on the riverbank, left over from the tidying up operations in 1942.**

Amongst the recognisable items of wreckage unearthed during the first days digging was an F52 camera lens and one of the 'Supermarine' embossed rudder pedals. These and many other items connected with Pilot Officer Charles Barber and Spitfire X4784 are now on display in the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum near Chichester.

However, as this could not be guaranteed, it was decided to drive a steel piling dam across the river several yards upstream of the crash site and to dam off the river about 120 yards downstream where it passed through a narrow culvert under a bridge. This spot would make an ideal location to place large water pumps, lifting the water up from the isolated section of river and across to the downstream side of the bridge. Fortunately, there was little water flowing downstream, so it was not foreseen that there would be a problem of water backing up against the main dam.

From Wednesday, August 27, the River Authority pumping station had been working flat out to reduce the levels, and with some measure of success. However, problems were experienced with large quantities of river weed being drawn into the water intakes and choking the pumps. More serious, though, was the problem of water seeping back into the pumped section from sluices downstream which had less than effective boards. Despite herculean efforts by the staff of the Water Authority, the problem could not be resolved, and by the evening of Thursday, August 28, it was clear that the water level would only be reduced by about 10 to 12 inches. This at least, was better than nothing and even these few inches represented many thousands of gallons of water over the stretch of river which had been pumped. From this point on it was entirely down to the recovery team to deal as best they could with the problem.



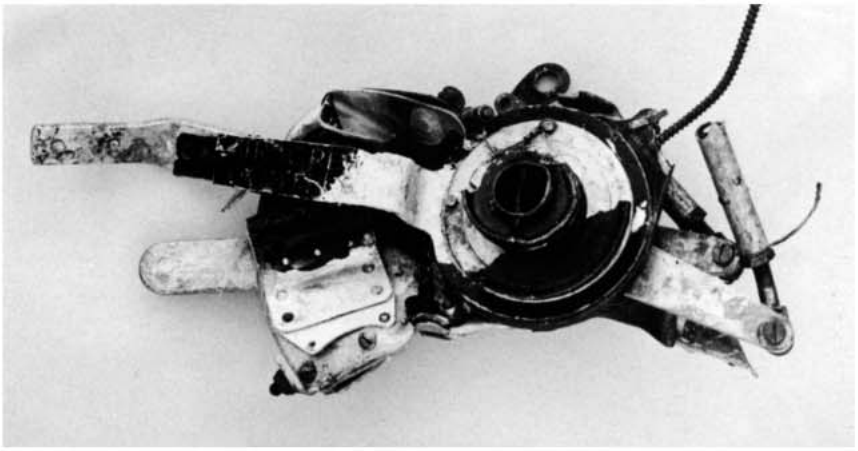
The pilot's escape kit was discovered on the first day's digging, in excellent condition. It included a map, compasses, and hacksaw plus French and Dutch money.

The main period scheduled for damming and pumping was on Friday, August 29, and by 9.00 a.m. the hired Poclain excavator was on site and working to place the steel shuttering across the stream. Once the steel sheets had been driven into place a polythene sheet was stretched across the 'wet' side of the dam by Dick Walker in his wetsuit, and an earth bank piled against the 'dry' side of the dam. With the bridge culvert closed downstream, both pumps were then put into operation, each one moving an astonishing 12,000 gallons an hour! Not surprisingly it was not long before an appreciable difference in the water levels could be discerned.

No account of the salvage of X4784 would be complete without mention of Andy Cresswell, who took responsibility for the damming and pumping operations on the site over several days and nights. Without him and his trusty pumps the operation would have been doomed to failure.

Whilst pumping continued, preparations were made at the actual crash site by way of removal of the topsoil and the digging of a ramp down to the anticipated excavation area on the embankment. During this operation numerous small items came to light which pointed to the actual impact spot being exactly on the bank/waterline as indicated by Mr Mair and the Sussex Police Report. One major clue was the discovery of two wing mounted gun blast tubes; one just into the field from the bank and the other found by Dick Walker as he probed the bed of the still-flooded river. Both items had been buried vertically, and their separation distance meant that each came from different wings. Although X4784 was an unarmed aircraft it would have been jigged up and built basically as a standard fighter, and therefore the blast tubes would have been fitted although they would have remained empty. Unless the two tubes had been moved subsequent to the crash they were, therefore, an important indicator of the exact position of the buried wreckage, estimated from these two items to be on the bank with the wings forming a 45-degree angle across the embankment and the water.

By late afternoon on August 29 the level of water had been reduced to almost a trickle



The engine control quadrant, incorporating the throttle, mixture and airscrew control.

but, with the movement of water, the earth on the downstream side of the main dam had begun to slip on the black muddy bed of the river. If the movement continued the stability of the dam would obviously be threatened, particularly with such an enormous pressure of water building up against it on the upstream side. Surplus steel shuttering left over from the dam construction was therefore hastily assembled as a retaining wall for the earth bank, being driven deep into the river bed. Fortunately this prevented any further movement thus saving the dam and, quite probably, the entire project.

Having left the river almost drained on the Friday evening, it was a bitter blow to the team to discover at the 6.30 a.m. start on the Saturday that the culvert dam had failed to hold out overnight, allowing water to flood back into the drained section from downstream. Fortunately, however, the main dam upstream had held and remained watertight. Hastily the leaking dam was made good and the pumps brought back into action, although this hitch delayed for some time the beginning of the excavations. By 9.00 a.m. however the main work was underway.

Although every indication was that the impact point was below the bank, it was obviously unwise to commence digging before first exploring the river bed with the excavator bucket. Had the team done so, and had the excavation below the bank proved fruitless, it would then have been difficult, if not impossible, to move the area of operation to the river bed from the bank, as the already excavated hole would have meant that the machine would have dug itself out of reach of the centre of the river. However, with little indication of wreckage or disturbance from the bed of the river, the excavation was shifted to the landward side of the original timber shuttering which had been placed along the bank line. At about ten feet the signs were more promising; small fragments of airframe, a strong smell of aviation spirit and, at that depth, some large baulks of timber which had apparently been placed in the hole when excavated in April 1942 by the River Board drag-line. With renewed enthusiasm digging continued on this spot, with the excavated soil being carefully sifted for wreckage.

Very soon a considerable amount of the aircraft was being uncovered, including parts of the instrument panel, one rudder pedal, the camera control box, rolls of exposed film, the tail wheel, radio equipment, head armour, the pilot's escape kit and lastly the de Havilland propellor assembly. Evidence of human remains and uniform also came to light and were placed carefully into a specially prepared container. Nothing positive, however, had come to light to firmly identify the pilot or aeroplane, save for one gold cufflink and some numbering pencilled onto a piece of the radio equipment. This read '4-84', the digit between the 4 and the 8 having come away with flaking paintwork. However, this could well relate to X4784, the aeroplane's serial number. Obviously more evidence would be needed if a formal and positive identification were to be made, and it was plain by late afternoon on Saturday that a considerable amount of significant wreckage was still buried. Furthermore, it seemed that not all of the remains of the pilot had yet been found.

Unfortunately it was at this point that the excavator became firmly bogged down in the soft sub-soil which formed the base of the ramp from which it had been operating. Efforts to free it only made matters worse and, despite the hurried provision of a JCB in an attempt to dig away some of the soil trapping the Poclain, the rescue attempts failed. By this time the prospects looked bleak indeed! Despite a staggering 27-foot-deep hole, not enough had yet been recovered, but with the machine bogged in on the edge of a very unstable excavation, work had to be terminated overnight by a more than anxious recovery team and excavator driver. If the dams did not hold overnight the problems would be enormous, because if the water flooded back now it would fill the excavation and partially submerge the Poclain. Worse still, if the highly unstable bank supporting the machine should give way, then the Poclain would end up almost thirty feet below ground level, and possibly under water as well. Needless to say a sleepless night was had by one and all!

The pumps were kept running overnight, being fuelled up by Peter Foote and Phillipa Hodgkiss who had camped on site. Fortunately, by pumping out the residual water which had seeped back through the culvert, they ensured that the river remained dry, and it was a relieved team who discovered that the excavator was still sitting high and dry on the bank the following morning, though it had visibly sunk further into the glutinous grey mire. Early morning saw the arrival of a heavy Drott crawler on a low loader which was to be used to pull the machine clear of troubles and work was soon underway to free the Poclain from the mud and clay. In this respect the efforts of John Ellis, Terry Parsons, Brian Sadler and Peter Dimond were outstanding; all four of them toiled hard in unpleasant conditions to secure cables and chains to the excavator and to dig away the clay which was concealing the tracks and underside of the machine. Eventually John Ellis and Brian Sadler managed to dig a path clear to secure a chain around the main turret pillar beneath the excavator's body and this was then coupled to the Drott. By careful manoeuvring, and with much heaving and pulling by both machines, by midday the Poclain was eventually free.

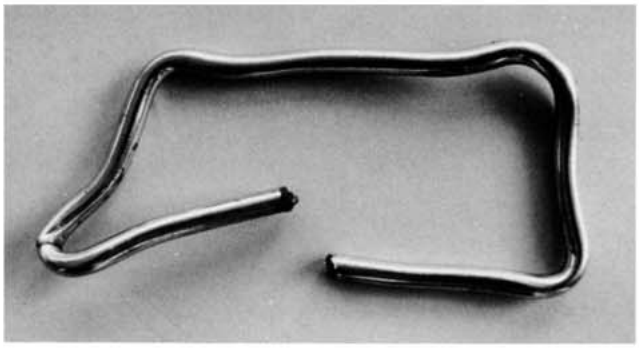
Despite all the disturbance, the main wall of the excavation had remained stable throughout, though a large earth movement overnight had caused one side to slip into the hole, covering the main wreckage location. Once the Poclain was free, driven now by the owner, Adrian Ovenden, the driver surveyed the site and expressed his wishes to carry on with the job in hand, not withstanding all the previous problems! His proposal was to dig a deeper ramp alongside the one where the machine had become bogged down, but this time using marsh mats which had been brought up to the site on the low loader along with the Drott. As his willingness to continue fell in line with the wishes of the Police for excavations to carry on, work was immediately put in hand to finish the job.

By mid-afternoon the new ramp was complete and digging began again in earnest. This time, however, there was a problem in locating the exact position of the wreckage as the spot had now been covered with soil from the landslip and by water seepage, thus losing all points of reference. Once sundry items of wreckage were uncovered it was concluded that the main wreckage area had been re-located. However the depth was now beyond the reach of the Poclain's arm and consequently yet another ramp had to be excavated in the same position, but this time deeper still. By now it was late afternoon and

The de Havilland propeller assembly was recovered with two blades still attached to the boss — one blade was given to Robert Mair, the landowner, by the recovery team for all his time and effort.

After an anxious night spent by all concerned, this is the sight that greeted the recovery team at first light on Sunday morning — the Poclain digger firmly embedded beside the unstable, water-filled excavation site.

Discovered amongst the shreds of uniform that came to light were Charles Barber's pilot's wings, which were suitably framed and presented to his brother Raymond — they are now on loan to the Tangmere Museum.



The pilot's parachute release handle or 'D' ring.

time was running out and costs were escalating by the hour. With the machine now teetering on the edge of the hole at what seemed a crazy angle work got underway again.

Very soon the pilot's seat armour was exposed at the bottom of the hole and, after little more than three scoops of the excavator bucket, the last remaining items of wreckage reached the surface. Careful sorting revealed more fragmented human remains and these were taken charge of by one of the police officers present, Constable Wallis. The Police also removed another gold cufflink and a silver cigarette case engraved with the initial 'B' which had been found in the pocket of a portion of RAF trouser lying together with the perfectly packed and preserved parachute. Minute examination of these last three or four bucket loads of soil satisfied the recovery team and the Police that all the bodily remains had now been accounted for. These searches also revealed one particularly significant find: amongst all the black mud one of Pilot Officer Barber's identity tags, still in good condition and quite legible. As a result of this discovery the Police were fully satisfied as to the pilot's identity, and informed the salvage team that the Yorkshire Police would be contacted immediately with a view to letting Raymond Barber have the news of the discovery without any further delay. Having collected the remains of Pilot Officer Barber and his personal effects, the Police then left the site after taking a formal statement from the project organiser.

With operations now at a conclusion save for reinstatement, the team had time to examine the finds and also took this opportunity to 'fly' the parachute. Amongst the other items retrieved were the remains of an F.52 camera, complete with almost intact lenses, and a complete K-type one-man dinghy. Apart from a few holes this was in first class order; still packed with rations, paddles, bungs, first aid dressings and a set of still-operative bellows. The potentially lethal CO_2 inflation cylinder was, however, disposed of at the bottom of the hole. Other items included more cockpit equipment, the back armour and lumps of engine block.

The excavation over, it now remained only to fill in the excavation and clear up the site, reinstate the embankment and then remove the dams to re-flood the river. This work was carried out on Monday September 1, the fourth and final day of the operation.

Raymond Barber had been formally notified at his Doncaster home on the Sunday evening by the Police that his brother's body had at last been found, and he immediately telephoned to offer his thanks and his gratitude to the team for the hard work they had carried out. Undoubtedly, the speed with which Mr Barber had been notified was unprecedented for such a case. Often the contacting of next of kin in such cases had been a long delayed affair, with protracted official enquiries and checks being made beforehand, the official contact then normally being made by way of a serving RAF officer from the nearest RAF establishment.

Almost immediately an RAF officer was assigned to the case, Flight Lieutenant Stephen Howard from nearby RAF Finningley who visited Raymond Barber every few days to keep him abreast of developments and to plan the funeral arrangements. At first it was considered that Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey would be Charles Barber's last resting place, alongside a number of fellow airmen who have been discovered

Personal effects of the pilot discovered, included a cigarette case bearing the initial 'B' (for Bertie), a pair of gold cufflinks and one of his identity discs, still clearly bearing his details — proof positive of the identity.

An incredible find was the pilots' K-type dinghy, unearthed complete with its paddles; bellows; first aid kit; rations and bungs.

Come Monday, all that was left for the recovery team to do was to tidy up the site — no mean feat in itself! Here the upstream *(left)* **and downstream** *(right)* **dams are removed. The site was totally cleared by the afternoon.**

This aerial photograph, taken on Monday, by team member Peter Dimond shows the extent of operations and the levels of reinstatement required!

in recent years. However, the family finally opted for interment just a short distance from the family's Yorkshire home in St Oswald's churchyard, the wartime burial ground for RAF Finningley.

On September 3, Police Constable Anthony Barnard, H.M. Coroner's Officer at Hastings, was able to announce that an inquest would not be held and on the same day released the remains to Wing Commander Bell at RAF Halton. By odd coincidence, it was at Halton that Charles Barber had joined the Royal Air Force fifty years before in 1936, and it was from there that his remains were prepared for the final journey home to Yorkshire and a military funeral on October 15, 1986.

Had he lived, Charles Barber would doubtless have risen to high office in the Church of England into which he was to have taken Holy Orders at the war's end. But, in the words of his brother Raymond, 'It was obviously not God's will that this was to be. To me I can never think of Bertie being sixty-six, or how he might be today. To me he will forever be just twenty-two.'

The closing scene of this epic recovery took place at St Oswald's churchyard, the burial ground for RAF Finningley, Yorkshire, beside which it lies. Under a bright autumn sky, on October 15, 1986, Charles Barber was laid to rest in the soil of his native Yorkshire — just as his family had always wanted. The Officer's cap resting on the coffin was Barber's own, having been kept by his brother Ray. As the final notes of the Last Post faded from the bugler's lips, a lone Spitfire roared low over the grave in a final salute, being lost to view as quickly as it came. A forty-four year old wish was finally granted.

A general view of the RAF Marine Section at St Paul's Bay in 1942, with High Speed Launch 107 on the left, photographed by Corporal Bill Jackson. In September 1985, Bill Jackson returned to Malta to record the changes surrounding his old base, in particular the extension of the breakwater wall, as well as the usual building development.

AFTER THE BATTLE

READERS' INVESTIGATIONS

MALTA MARINE CRAFT

BY BILL JACKSON

There is no doubt that the survival of Malta as an Allied base between 1940 and 1943 was due, in no small part, to the skill, tenacity and determination of fighter pilots flying Gladiators, Hurricanes and Spitfires often against impossible odds. Their story, quite rightly, has gone down in the pages of history. In those pages too we can find a record of the skill and bravery of those on the ground who kept the fighters flying.

Regrettably very few of the millions of words that have been written about that dark period in the island ever mention a tiny part of the RAF presence there upon which all aircrew depended along with, at times, the Royal Navy. As well as the Stores and Engineering Depots at RAF Kalafrana at the southern end of the island there was a small but efficient Marine Section which provided servicing, refuelling and beaching facilities for the Sunderland aircraft of No. 230 Squadron and other flying boats that visited the island. The craft based there included a Towing Pinnace, a 37½-foot Seaplane Tender, powered and non-powered petrol bowsers and High Speed Launch No. *107*.

Built in 1938, HSL *107* had been ferried to the island pre-war, her hull painted white with her identity number in black on her bows and across her square stern. Three 500 hp Napier Sealion engines gave her a top speed of almost 40 knots and at that speed she and her crew could remain at sea for ten hours if necessary and, though armed with twin ground Lewis guns, she was virtually unarmed, as her guns jammed after a few rounds from each one. This was not important in the early days of the Italian involvement as there was little likelihood of any Italian fighter attacking her, indeed on more than one occasion she was led to where a body floated in the sea by a Macchi 2000.

The ferocity of the aerial attacks on the island increased until by January 1942 there were 263 alerts in that month alone, keeping *107*'s crew permanently on top line readiness, the crews sleeping aboard her at first, then in a nearby surface shelter when the attacks grew heavier, a state which lasted throughout 1942.

Up to the end of 1941 HSL *107* was skippered by Flight Lieutenant Blake-Smith, and Flight Lieutenant Hardie had overall command of the Marine base. Flight Lieutenant Blake-Smith was replaced by Flight Lieutenant Crockett with Flight Lieutenant Maddocks in overall command. Flight Lieutenant Crockett's arrival preceded the arrival of two new rescue launches sent to the island as deck cargo. Miraculously they arrived undamaged and were soon in the water and ready at Kalafrana, with *107*. The new arrivals were numbered *128* and *129*, slightly smaller than *107* and slightly slower with a top speed of 35 knots. They were

HSL 107 returning to St Paul's Bay after a rescue mission, 1942.

Left: **Corporal Bill Jackson (left) and Leading Aircraftsman G. Evans (right) after an all night search in 1942.** *Right:* **Ex-Corporal and Ex-LAC in 1983.**

Left: **Sunderland passing Selmun Palace opposite St Paul's in 1942.** *Right:* **The fort still looks down on St Paul's in 1985.**

nicknamed 'Whalebacks' from the shape of their superstructure. Their arrival meant that extra bases could be opened on the island, giving greater range and quicker response.

HSL *107* took over Sunderland House at St Paul's Bay from the crew of the RASC launch the *Clive*. She had operated from there towing targets for the heavy gunned shore batteries. HSL *128* operated from a completely new base in Sliema Creek while HSL *129* remained at Kalafrana.

Kalafrana had led a charmed life from an air raid point of view, Marsaxlokk Bay receiving most of the bombs intended for the buildings ashore. The luck changed when during an attack in early 1942 the concrete jetties and the shallow water camber were on the receiving end and the hangar that at one time had housed up to four Sunderlands was left a heap of twisted girders, with bomb-craters bordering the slipways. Luckily neither of the slipways themselves or the barrack blocks were hit.

It was soon after this, on February 4, 1942, that HSL *129* was attacked by six Me 109s between Filfola and Malta. The front gunner was killed outright in one of the first strafings but, despite losing his thumb to a cannon shell, the corporal coxswain managed to get *129* back to Kalafrana with her skipper, Pilot Officer Nicholls, badly wounded as well as the rear gunner. Both died from their wounds a few hours later.

One of the wireless operators had a lucky escape. He had been on watch during the attack and thought he had bumped his head during some of the evasive action. It was not until *129* had been beached to stop her from sinking that another of the crew noticed blood trickling slowly down the side of his neck. It was only then that he found out that an armour-piercing round had come through the starboard side of *129* at a shallow enough angle to pierce his scalp, bounce off his skull and come out again. There was only an inch between entry hole and exit hole. The spent bullet was found later rolling around in the bilges.

HSL *129* never went to sea again. Almost repaired, the lean-to hangar she was in took a near miss and *129* was buried under the rubble. All that could be done was to cannibalise her for spares.

There was now a need for more reorganisation. HSL *128* returned to Kalafrana under Flight Lieutenant Crockett and the RASC Launch *Clive*, now numbered HSL *100*, took her place at Sliema crewed by her civilian crew. HSL *107* remained at St Paul's with Flight Lieutenant Price and Pilot Officer Baker in command. The end of the campaign in North Africa saw the arrival of two new launches at RAF Kalafrana, A 'Hanson and Dorset' No. *2557* that reached the island as deck cargo again, and a Long Range Pinnace which was collected from Algiers and sailed to the island. This one was eventually based in a cove at Ghajn Tuffieha on the rock-bound western side of Malta.

The arrival of the Santa Maria convoy replenished stocks of fuel and ammunition that had got dangerously low as well as bringing sufficient food to relieve the near starvation of everyone on the island. This and the preparations for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, set the RAF on an attacking rôle instead of a defensive one, with a corresponding increase in the number of rescue calls made on the island's launches.

The construction of a new airfield on Gozo increased the work of the marine craft, both men and materials were frequently ferried from St Paul's Bay to the harbour at Mgarr, to say nothing of Allied Commanders who wanted to see the project for themselves.

Air strikes on targets in Sicily required rescue calls to be answered that were nearer and nearer the enemy coast. One such call brought the rescue of Flight Lieutenant Taggart, a Spitfire flight commander, from just two or three miles off the Sicilian coast. HSL *107* was requested to make the attempt to pick him up after an earlier attempt to rescue him by a Walrus of the Fleet Air Arm at Hal Far failed with the loss of another Spitfire, one of the Walrus's escorts. HSL *107*, carrying a volunteer crew, left its Maltese base in full daylight and, after crossing a shallow water minefield, searched for nearly an hour off the coast before sighting the pilot and pulling him aboard.

Marine craft at Kalafrana were called on to patrol areas off the coast where controlled mines were to be tested in the interests of the safety of the Maltese fishermen. This task was always carried out supposedly in secrecy but the fishermen were always there!

HSL *107* took in tow a Cant 506B float-plane of the Italian Regia Aeronautica which had been ferrying a Beaufort crew from a Greek island to Taranto as PoWs and which they had hijacked. It ran out of fuel as Spitfires from Malta started attacking and managed to put down on the sea a few miles from St Paul's Bay. Because her engines were overheating at the slow towing revs, *107* handed over to seaplane tender *281* to get the aircraft into the bay and moored.

Sunderland flying boats still visited the island at intervals, arriving and leaving during the dark hours. A floating flarepath was installed for this operation and for training aircrews for clandestine operations using a Heinkel floatplane, but perhaps the most significant task for any HSL was the capture from the cliffs below Dingli of the Maltese spy Borg Pisano by HSL *107* skippered by Flight Lieutenant Price after Pisano had attempted to land on the island by rubber dinghy from an Italian submarine on May 19, 1942. A navy diving crew was ferried to the place of his capture the following day so that equipment he had brought with him could be recovered from where it had been sunk prior to his capture.

HSL *107* left Malta in 1944 to operate from a base in Italy, proceeding under her own steam. All told, the marine craft of Malta and the high speed launches were responsible for the rescue of over 200 aircrew, both Allied and enemy.

Left: **The rescue of Spitfire pilot Sergeant Goodwin on January 29, 1943 and,** *right,* **that of Flying Officer Hodges of 126 Squadron on May 22, 1943; just two of over 200 successful rescues that returned valuable aircrew to their units.**